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For Bren, Jagger, Jett, Max, and Riley. May your lives be rich with wonder and filled with magic.

THE

HOUSE

I believed in ghosts, God, witches, and the afterlife. What I didn't believe in was my future. It was almost fifty years ago, and I was thirteen. I didn't know if I would survive the nuclear holocaust, acid rain, or manage to get to old age without committing a mortal sin and landing in purgatory after death. Today, with fewer years ahead of me than behind, that year still haunts my dreams.

Sitting on the steps waiting for the bell to ring, my best friend Lynn walked up and plopped herself down between Claire and me.

"No way!" I said as I stood to get a better look at the mass of trees across the playground.

"I swear," she said, pulling me back down. "You can't see it because it's set really far back..."

"Take us over there," I interrupted.

"Letty, shhh! I don't want the other kids to hear us." Lynn said as she leaned in to tighten our circle.

"Yeah, I want to see it, too," whispered Claire.

"Me, too," said Debbie.

"Okay, okay, right after school. Let's meet behind the rectory."

I didn't know what it was about me and houses, but as soon as Lynn described the house she just discovered beyond the trees, there was nothing that was going to keep me away. From the time I could hold a crayon, fancy houses with elaborate floor plans were the principal subject of my drawings.

"You should be an architect, Letty," my father used to say as I proudly presented my latest creation. "We'll build this house in *Baja*, next door to your *abuelita*'s."

Tree-lined neighborhoods, brightly painted houses with porch swings and basketball hoops over the garages, covered page after page in my notebook. But back in 1971, all I'd ever known were *barrios* with crowded apartment buildings. In our tiny apartment on 19th Street, little Diego's crib was in the living room, and I shared a bedroom with my other two brothers. The closest I'd ever come to having a backyard was the stoop between my family's apartment and the one next door. My playground was the *barrio*'s alleys and the carports behind the buildings.

A lot of kids from my school lived in neat little bungalows built after the war, and a few, like Lynn, lived in large modern homes in nice neighborhoods. Lynn was my best friend back then—had been since third grade. We had almost nothing in common, but we were seldom apart. The L twins, the other kids called us: Lynn and Letty. She had blonde hair and blue eyes. My skin had an olive complexion to go with my black hair and brown eyes. She played softball, and I took ballet. She lived in the neighborhood across the street from the school on Saint Cyr Place. I lived in an area crowded by apartment buildings and mini-marts. The cars and trucks parked on my street were loaded up with lawn mowers and vacuum cleaners at night. During the day, they were parked on Saint Cyr Place where their contents were put to use. I taught her to eat hot flour tortillas smeared in butter and the words to "La Cucaracha." She taught me how to play it on her piano.

We both went to Saint Benedict's Catholic School. From the playground we could almost see Lynn's neighborhood. There was an alley behind her cul-de-sac that dead-ended at a rather ordinary cinder block wall. The wall enclosed the houses in the tidy little neighborhood, protecting the new from the past. Its blocks stood in sturdy formation until they turned the corner and became a fence. A fence we could see beyond the playground of our school, but seldom noticed.

This wrought iron fence with its sturdy brick pilasters had been there forever. A dense assortment of trees protected the occupant of the enclosure and hid it from view. The years came and went, but it never occurred to me, or any of my friends at school, to question what existed on the other side of that wrought iron fortress. The fence was just there, ordinary in its existence like a streetlight or a fire hydrant.

But there was little else I could think of the rest of the day. Anticipation forced me to look up at the clock every few minutes, eagerly waiting for school to be over. The second the bell rang, the four of us headed for the rectory. We always wore shorts under our plaid uniforms, so they could be

discarded when the need arose. Quickly, we stepped out of our skirts, stashing them with our book bags in the bushes by the rectory gate and took off.

Freed from these schoolgirl trappings, the four of us crossed the street.

"How are we supposed to climb this wrought iron fence?" Claire asked.

"Good question," I said as I grabbed the bars. Little metal arrowheads topped each one. "It's kinda high, but we'll figure it out."

"But everyone will see us," Debbie said, anxiously looking back at the school yard still crowded with kids.

"No you guys. This way," Lynn said, running around the corner and down the alley. We followed her to the cinderblock wall. "We need to climb over this wall to get to it."

It was a good six feet high, but we were undeterred. With strong young legs, a will, and a running start, we vaulted ourselves up. My saddle shoes didn't offer much traction, so my biceps strained as I struggled to straddle the top.

"Are we going through those bushes?" Claire asked once on top.

"Yeah, but it isn't very far," Lynn said.

"It looks kinda dark."

"Don't be a dweeb. Let's go."

Jumping down in rapid succession, we landed on something soft. The spongy layer of rotting leaves was an unlikely seduction to what was beyond the thick brush that surrounded us, but we were spies entering enemy territory, so we moved on. Maneuvering through the bushes, curiosity quickened our step.

I remember the late summer day being tepid, yet low hanging tree branches created a somber feeling. I tried to move quietly, but the twigs and leaves cracked and snapped under my feet. Looking down, I saw mud caked on the soles of my shoes—a shot of dread, not from what lay ahead, but from what my mother would say about me getting dirty.

"¿Por qué no te portas como una niña?" I could hear her scolding me in Spanish. "You don't see your cousins running around *sinvergüenza.*" I forced the thought out of my head and kept moving.

My friends and I made our way through the overgrown brush and around the trees—immense watchmen rooted to the ground. After a minute or so, we reached the remnants of a brick pathway. We followed it until the peak of a structure could be seen rising into view. My heart beat faster, keeping pace with my growing anticipation.

Hesitantly, we stepped into the clearing. The ghost of a home emerged before us, visible as the decaying corpse of a mansion.

It was immense; the biggest house I'd ever seen. It was the kind of structure I had only read about in books—neglected villas, haunted manor houses, specter-tenanted castles created by the literary greats. Although I was only thirteen, my heart ached for a life I knew I was not born into. Now, there it stood. The house in my drawings. My house.

We walked around to the front, trepidation slowing our pace.

"That's the biggest porch I've ever seen," Claire whispered.

"It's called a veranda," Lynn corrected.

"The old plantation houses in the South have those," Debbie added. "Remember? Like in *Gone with the Wind*."

I leaned back to get a better look at the four dormer windows that stood on watch along the third floor. I envied whoever may have once looked out from inside. I imagined a girl like me wondering where life would lead. On the second floor there was a balcony on the right, and ivy grew out from between the shingles on the roof like Medusa's hair. The shutters on either side of the windows seemed to be stepping down from their stations.

Filled with apprehension, we managed to ascend six massive stone steps to double entry doors that must have been ten feet tall.

"That's mahogany," Lynn said as I rubbed my hand along the weathered grain.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"My dad's desk at work is made out of mahogany."

"Do you think it is unlocked?"

"It's not. My brother already tried."

I tiptoed across the veranda to where Debbie was peering in the window of a round room cupping her hands around her eyes to block the glare.

"Wouldn't it be cool to have a house with a turret room like this?" she asked, wiping the dirt from the tip of her nose.

I wasn't sure what she meant by turret room, but I nodded in agreement just the same.

The melancholy color of the house appeared to have once been a deep forest green with red trim. Neglected overgrown shrubs and vines cradled the house and seemed to hug it protectively from the wind, the mist, and curious adolescents who disrespected all that was old and sacred.

As we walked around the house, our uneasiness slowly subsided, so I focused on absorbing every detail of its architecture. Brick by brick, two chimneys rose up on either side. I imagined the stained glass windows filtered colorful light into nooks or secret hiding places. A lonely banister led us up the back steps to the kitchen porch. We peered through windows tinted with years of accumulated dirt and weather.

"There's an open door inside!" I said.

"It looks like there's a landing behind it," Debbie added. "I bet it leads to the basement." She tried the kitchen door, but it was firmly shut—door knob frozen. She stepped back and wiped her hand on her shorts and said, "Actually, this place is kinda creepy"

"But it's so cool!" Claire said. "¡Bien padre!"

"I told you guys I wasn't lying."

"Let's see if we can figure out some other way to get in," Claire said, stepping back down the stairs and looking up to the second floor windows.

"Maybe that's not such a good idea."

"Debbie might be right. What if an ax murderer lives here? Like Charles Manson."

"Or...or...a ghost," I added with ghoulish excitement.

"Yeah! What if it's haunted?" Claire sounded hopeful.

"Well, there is only one way to find out! Let's get in." Lynn knew no fear.

We walked around again, scrutinizing every inch for a possible entry point. Behind overgrown bushes, we could see the basement windows.

"Let's try those," Lynn said as she stepped over a shrub.

The darkness behind the windowpane made me suck in my breath. "No way!" I said as Debbie and I pulled her back. "Let's not get carried away. There's probably rats and stuff down there. Besides, how were you planning on getting back out?"

We walked on.

Our search confirmed no possibilities for entry. Emboldened, we walked back around to the front and sat on the steps—now familiar and proprietary. The house had taken on a sense of peacefulness, and we were happy to just sit and take it all in. Birds chirped and a chipmunk could be seen scampering up an oak tree. I felt as if I'd been transported to another time.

There were no telephone wires or asphalt that I could see. The sounds of traffic had vanished.

"How long do you think this house has been here?" Claire asked.

"I bet it's at least a hundred years old," was Lynn's guess.

"Years ago the town must have grown up around it," Debbie said. "Someone must have just locked it up and moved away."

"I bet whoever it was wanted to come back but was lost at sea." My imagination was warming up. "Or is stranded on a deserted island still waiting to be rescued," I added.

"Probably the people just died, and there was no one to leave it to." Debbie was a sweet girl and very smart but lacking on the romantic side.

Looking at my watch, I gasped, "¡Chihuahua! I'm usually home by now. I better go or I'm going to be in trouble."

"¡Ay Dios mio! My bus will be here in ten minutes," Claire said jumping off the steps. "Let's come back tomorrow."

"Okay, but promise no one else can know about it." Lynn was resolute. "Swear!"

"Okay, we swear."

"Swear to God."

The four of us quickly raised our right hands in oath, "Swear to God, cross our hearts, and hope to die." We crossed our hearts and took off running back the way we came.

I remember that night I couldn't sleep thinking about the house. I couldn't believe that anything like that existed in that town. Why hadn't anyone ever mentioned it before? Could it be possible that everyone had forgotten about it? Or had anyone actually ever lived there?

I thought about how I hated living in an apartment with six people sharing one bathroom. There was never any place to hide when my parents got into arguments, and the people who lived upstairs were always playing the radio too loud. I longed to know what life would be like living in a mansion, even one that was hundreds of years old, like the one we just discovered. I imagined crannies where I could hide from my brothers and parents and be alone with my books. Closing my eyes, I pretended that my room was on the third floor. Instead of the streetlight, it was the moon that shone through my dormer window, that a real front yard separated me from the street where the high school kids liked to drag race in the middle of the

night. I would wake up to birds chirping and a squirrel scratching at my window.

Yes, the house was creepy, but its voice was sweet, and it called me. That night, it planted a little seed in my soul. Its fledgling roots growing ever so slowly or lying dormant for years only to stir in my dreams until making their way to my fingers to write this tale.

SAINT

BENEDICT'S

It was the beginning of my last year at Saint Benedict's. The year started out much the same as all the others. On the morning of the first day, the smell and feel of new white leather saddle shoes made me resolve to work harder, study longer, and achieve the unachievable. My pencil pouch was unmarred by the graphite of sharpened pencils, and my virgin Pee-Chee folder snapped and popped as I inserted a fresh supply of notebook paper. As in years past, I grabbed my lunch recognizing the familiar weight of a brown paper bag containing a baloney sandwich, a Twinkie, and an apple and headed off to school.

Yes, those were the signals that a new year was starting—full of great expectations and promises. But, like most New Year's resolutions, those promises wilted and were forgotten before the end of September. By the time my first report card was sent home, only seventeen of the twenty-five daily math problems were ever completed, spelling words were seldom studied, and the Age of Enlightenment still lingered in the dark. I was in the eighth grade. There were important lessons to be learned, but they weren't those found in textbooks or written into the curriculum.

At thirteen I believed that I had crossed the threshold of womanhood. My ribs had grown accustomed to the constraint of my bra. Hip huggers were the fashion, and I finally had hips to be fashionable. My long dark hair hung loose, free of childish ribbons and barrettes. I spent hours posing in front of the mirror to determine my best side, my best smile, and how to sensually flip back my hair. Acne ointments and feminine products became routine requests before my mother's weekly trip to the grocery store. But with these long awaited changes, the turmoil that only adolescent girls experience also began to seep into my life.

But worst of all, my parents were immigrants. And even though my brothers and I were born in Texas, my parents never completely made it

across the border. As was the custom, my brothers were placed on pedestals —sons who would define our family. They could do no wrong. But living in a new country with a different set of rules, my mother feared that life in America would have a bad influence on my moral development.

"Americanas son sinvergüenza," my mother would tell me over and over. "They have no shame wearing bikinis and short skirts and walking around sin chaparones." I couldn't comprehend this. The fashion magazines and the styles in the department store windows were all the same. Yes, the skirts were shorter than our school uniforms, and the boots were shiny, but that was in. Why was I sinvergüenza to want to be modern and stylish? I saw no shame in wanting to fit in.

Although boys had always been my classmates, they were quickly becoming forbidden fruit for me. I was being taught that they were after only one thing, and if I wasn't prepared to fend off their trickery, I would be doomed to a life of shame and humiliation. Seldom did a day go by that my mother didn't try to instill in me a belief that a Mexican girl was different—chaste and virtuous—a model for the women of the world to emulate.

"All your cousins have worn the white wedding dress," she would say. "Con velo y corona they walk down the aisle of the cathedral with their heads held high."

When I was younger, I longed for the day that I could prove to the world that I, too, was virtuous and chaste. I would hold an imaginary bouquet and practice the bridal march in my room in front of the mirror. But as I grew older, I dreaded hearing the news that another cousin in Mexico was getting married. These announcements became a threat to either resist the decadence around me or live in disgrace. I often wondered if my mother's greatest worry in life was that I would be the one cousin who couldn't wear the white dress. She would be humiliated, a failure as a mother, and pitied by my numerous uncles and aunts. By the time I was thirteen it was 1971, and this was America, not Mexico. She had much to worry about.

My earliest memories of the news was of constant rioting and violent protests—Vietnam, civil rights, labor strikes. When a gang of teenagers shot up the liquor store on the corner, my mother became too frightened to stay in the city. That very day she gathered her four little children around her. "Do you want these boys to grow up and join the gangs?" she asked my father as she hugged Manny in closer while balancing Diego on her hip. "And what about Letty?"

My father placed his hand under my chin and looked into my big brown eyes. I had a feeling we would be moving. And we did. Not far, but far enough away from our *barrio* in the city that life became more difficult for my mother. She could no longer eavesdrop in the aisle of the grocery stores for the neighborhood gossip. The sales clerks and cashiers no longer spoke Spanish with Mexican, Cuban, or Columbian accents. I bore the increasing burden of having to translate for her during visits to the doctor or at the drugstore. But knowing Spanish quickly became a curse that brought me little except derision and taunts of "dirty Mexican."

We enrolled in the local Catholic school. "Why can't we go to the public school? Please!" was my constant plea.

"No! Don't ask again," she said. So my brothers and I were among the first to disrupt the uniformity of the fair headed kids of Saint Benedict's. The rust and dents on my family's car always stood out among the shiny Town and Country wagons of my classmates on the evening of the school's annual open house. Being Mexican made me stand out, not only because of my black hair and brown eyes, but because I didn't have a name like Kimberly, Carol, or Barbara. I was Leticia Marquez, but many only saw me as the first to infiltrate the purity of their American dream.

As far as schools go, Saint Benedict's was very small. There were only enough kids at Saint Benedict's to fill two classrooms at each grade level. The group to which I was assigned never changed from year to year. I was assigned to 3B when I started, and my classmates and I were promoted en masse to 4B the following year. The A classes got the windows on the street side while the B classes got a view of the school yard. I was in 8B that year. Instead of concentrating on my lessons, daydreams played out in my head while my eyes focused on the school yard, empty except for the kickball diamonds and lonely tetherball poles.

That school yard consisted of acres of asphalt, but it was our oasis from the drudgery that was our classroom. Yet, even without the confining walls, the nuns held sway over us. The good sisters of Saint Benedict's had drawn an imaginary line on the playground to separate the girls' yard from the boys'. A chain link fence separated us both from the rest of the world.

During lunch, my friends and I sat at tables under the arbor along the back fence. We brought our sandwiches and potato chips from home, but lunchtime was not so much about eating. This was the time to connect and find an identity. Lunch was a reprieve from the monotonous structure that

was our school day. Those thirty minutes bonded us more than the other six hours of confinement. Here is where we formed our cliques and learned our lessons in the social norms that we would either adopt or reject as we each developed our moral consciousness.

Again the boys were separated from the girls and sat at the tables on the left while the girls occupied the right. We never inquired as to the topic of conversation on the boys' side of the aisle, but this separation allowed for much snubbing, bragging, and general character trashing among the girls.

"When is Rhonda McMillan ever going to get boobs? She's as flat as a board."

"Did you hear that Karen Van Arsdale had to have her uniform skirt special ordered because they don't make one big enough for her?"

"Excuse me! You can't sit here, Crater Face. Go sit with the other freaks."

"Did you see that Sharon Hanson dyed her hair strawberry blonde and painted her fingernails brown? Sister Mary Louise was furious!"

"I can't believe her mother let her. My mom wouldn't let me dye my hair in a million years. Is she going to be suspended?"

"Her mother was in the principal's office this morning. Sharon's always doing stuff like that. She's such a slut."

Thirty minutes for lunch allowed plenty of time to both eat and play or socialize. The boys never hesitated to run out to play basketball or kickball, but the girls just sat until shooed away by the lunch monitors. These volunteer moms usually stayed near the little kids to help open thermos bottles or to make sure the apples were eaten and not thrown away. Every now and then, one of them would come to check on the big girls and clear us off the benches.

"Go out to the playground. Get some sun and exercise," a volunteer mom routinely commanded.

It was that one cloudy day in early September when the volunteer was occupied with a second grader who had a touch of the stomach flu that Lynn, Claire, Debbie, and I were able to linger a bit longer at the lunch tables and stare at the clouds hovering just over a dense collection of trees across the street.

"What's over there?" asked Claire looking toward the fence and its trees. Being new to Saint Benedict's that year, Claire had not yet begun to take everything for granted. We shrugged our shoulders at her question. "That's a lot of trees," Claire continued. "Is it a park or something? Don't you live in that neighborhood over there, Lynn?" she said pointing to the cluster of houses down the street.

"Yeah, but I don't know. I've heard there's an old beat-up house over there. I've never actually seen it, though," Lynn confessed.

"It looks like a forest to me," I said.

"It's not a forest! I'd know if I lived next to a forest. Besides, why would a forest be in the middle of a city and surrounded by a fence?" Lynn asked. "C'mon Letty," she said, rapping her knuckles on my head.

"Maybe it's someone's yard."

"Are you kidding? No one has a yard that big!"

"I bet it's part of the cemetery," was Debbie's guess.

"No, the cemetery is on the other side of McKinley Boulevard across the street from the hospital," Lynn explained slowly as her curiosity piqued. "I never thought about it before either. I wonder what *is* over there."

I pondered the same question as I stared at the trees across the street, seeing them for the first time. My growing curiosity was cut short as the dreaded bell ended our precious few minutes of freedom, and we meandered back to the classroom for history with Sister Frances Joseph. It was after school that day that Lynn coaxed her little brother into climbing the wall at the end of their street.

THE WORLD IS COMING TO AN END!

With childish impatience, I arrived at school restless for the day to end. My thoughts were filled with what I would find when we returned to the house we had just discovered, but I had seven tedious hours to wait. The routine of the school day seldom varied. The morning bell rang at eight a.m., and we suffered through two hours of lessons before our fifteen-minute recess at ten. Being in the eighth grade, my friends and I hung out by the planters adjacent to the church, a place we inherited as a rite of passage.

Bottlebrush trees shaded us from the morning sun, and our air of superiority buffered our contact with the kids from the younger grades. Lynn and Debbie made up my circle of friends until this year when we initiated Claire, and we became a group of four.

Like every new kid at school, Claire became the focus of attention that first day. Her family had just moved from Miami. She spoke Spanish like me, but I never would have guessed it because she was black. I'd never met a black girl who spoke Spanish before. She was Cuban, she was black, and black was beautiful. Tall for thirteen, she was slender with tightly curled raven hair nearly reaching her waist. Soft spoken, she had a pert little nose and flawless skin. Wherever she went, she carried with her an air of refinement. When she stood, she leaned seductively to one side. She won me over as soon as I saw her, but I envied her at the same time.

Her father was a doctor who fled Cuba with his wife and children after the revolution. They lived in a house in a nice neighborhood—not Lynn's neighborhood, but one with houses instead of apartment buildings. Claire played the violin, and she could beat her older brother at chess. She didn't need to translate for her parents—both were fluent in English. Even her mother had graduated from college. My parents never made it past elementary school, but with Claire, I began to realize that Hispanic people could go to college. She filled me with both pride and jealousy.

Martin Luther King had been assassinated a few years earlier, and the civil rights movement was all over the news. The black kids in town all went to the public schools, so Claire was a bit of an anomaly at Saint Benedict's. All the kids were friendly and wanted to be her friend mostly to prove that they weren't prejudiced. Then someone called her black. We all held our breath.

"I'm not black," she politely, yet firmly corrected them. "I'm Cuban."

The kids gathered around. "I didn't know Cubans were black," was the first admission of our ignorance.

"Don't Cubans speak Spanish?"

"I speak Spanish," Claire stated defiantly.

"Black people can't speak Spanish."

"I thought all you Mexicans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans looked the same."

"There are Mexicans with blonde hair and blue eyes."

"I've never seen one."

"If you're blonde you can't be Mexican."

"Yes, you can! Some Mexicans come from Spain. You know, like some Americans come from England. Spain's in Europe and Europeans are blonde."

"My family is from Portugal, and I'm not blonde."

"You're probably part black."

"I thought black people came from Africa."

"The people down the street from us are from Africa, and they aren't black."

"There's a black man in my grandma's building who talks with a British accent. So you don't have to come from Africa to be black."

"So Cubans can be black."

"I'm not black!"

I understood Claire. Like her, all I wanted to do was fit in. But I was brown skinned and brown eyed, not like Dick and Jane from the books that taught me to read. And my mom didn't belong to the PTA because she didn't speak English. Sometimes I pretended that I couldn't speak Spanish. Spanish was a burden that I believed I was condemned to carry for the rest

of my life. I'm sure that's how Claire felt about her dark skin. We were insecure but didn't know it. Maybe if we denied our differences, they would just go away. Little did we know that losing them would be the same as cutting off an arm or a leg. These insecurities would cause us to become fragmented teenagers unsure of how we had fallen apart. One day they would make us strong. One day, they would make us proud, but that was years away.

The fact that we were in a Catholic school gave us a commonality that united us beyond race or culture. We were "the Catholics" in the eyes of the community. Our white blouses and plaid skirts could be seen from miles away. Boys in their salt and pepper corduroy pants could be immediately identified as the culprits of a myriad of childish mischief.

It wasn't until I went to a public high school that I realized that people actually practiced other religions. Of course, I knew about the Jews, because they killed Jesus and weren't going to Heaven, and the Protestants, because that's what the public school kids were. But I didn't know about the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, or the Mormons. I thought all Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims only existed in our history books and had perished shortly after the cavemen.

We were told that pagan babies lived in far away, foreign lands.

"They are lost souls who will die and go to Hell without our financial contributions," the sisters would tell us every year. I imagined that little kids existed without parents or siblings, cared for only by nuns, priests, and Catholic missionaries who ventured out into the world to gather them together and give them our nickels and dimes.

"As soon as the class collects five dollars, we can choose a name for our pagan baby," Sister informed us as an added incentive. We took great pride in giving them Catholic names. Hands shot up, eager to make a suggestion.

"I say we name it Susan."

"I vote for Jennifer."

"We should name it after a saint."

"How about Theresa?"

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"I vote for Michael if it is a boy."

"Remember that your generosity will be remembered when you get to Heaven," Sister Martha would say as she passed around the collection jar. Somewhere in deepest, darkest Africa, there must be dozens of Theresas, Susans, and Michaels whose souls have been saved thanks to our monthly donations.

Year after year, various nuns and an occasional lay teacher told us that we were better than the public school kids. The public schools were filled with gangs and pot smokers. The girls were loose and would end up getting into trouble without the moral guidance of the nuns. Plus, the public school kids weren't learning to read very well. The newspapers said so, "Johnny Can't Read."

"You are getting a far better education," Sister Martha reminded us again that year. "If you apply yourselves, you have a good chance at being accepted at Catholic Girls' Academy or Saint Perpetua's High School for you boys. Bishop Thomas is further away but very prestigious. If you graduate from any of them, you would almost certainly be guaranteed admission to a good college."

We would grow up, get married and have nice Catholic families. We would live in nice neighborhoods and send our children to Catholic school so that the cycle could keep going. Or better yet, we would become nuns and priests.

Sister Martha was our new religion and math teacher. A recent transfer from Phoenix, she was greatly overweight. She wore the modern habit consisting of a gray knee length skirt and matching wimple that permitted her bangs to hang loose and help hide her enormous forehead. The pantyhose covering her thighs could be heard rubbing together as she walked down the hall. Swish, click, swish, click, swish, click. Nylons alternating with her modest heels. We nicknamed her Destructo and took adolescent delight in drawing caricatures of her eating San Francisco. Our folders and book covers were extensively covered with doodles of Destructo squashing students in the hall as they ran in fear for their lives, or Destructo in a battle to the death with Godzilla. Little did our moral education transfer to the



realities of life.

As soon as the bell rang at two-thirty, my little circle of friends and I eagerly left our scholarly routine and returned to the house we had just

discovered. We approached it like furry little rodents afraid to come out into a clearing. We walked quietly to the edge of the bushes, and once we were sure that no one was around, we cautiously stepped out into the yard. The house stood vigilant for anyone who might disturb its peace. Yet, for some reason I felt that the four of us were welcome. Somehow, we belonged there. We had been invited.

As far as I could tell, no one had been there since we discovered it the day before. Again we circled the house trying every window and every door to verify that nothing had been overlooked. We resigned ourselves to the fact that getting in would not be by any conventional method. Settling down to ponder the situation on the front steps, our attention was soon diverted to the massive trees in the front yard.

Never wasting an opportunity for a physical challenge, Lynn said, "Let's go climb those trees."

We ran over and without hesitation, started up. There were so many branches that grew out in conveniently placed intervals that climbing the tree was as easy as climbing a ladder. Lynn wasted no time getting to the highest possible branch. The rest of us climbed about here and there for several more minutes, but soon the four of us were sitting on our own separate branches of the enormous tree like little monkeys.

"What can you see from up there?" Debbie asked.

"Nothing, just leaves."

"Climb over here to my branch," I said. We all maneuvered about pretending we lived in a tree house like in *Swiss Family Robinson*. "I remember hearing on television about some people who sit in trees so that they can't be cut down. They don't come down until the people trying to cut down the tree go away. Days!"

"How did they go to the bathroom?" Claire asked.

"Don't know. Or how did they eat?"

"People probably bring them food," Lynn suggested.

"I'd be afraid of falling out when I fell asleep," I said.

"Let's go back and sit on the veranda for a while," Debbie suggested when the height she had reached made her tremble.

As we became more comfortable being there, it didn't take long for us to claim our spots on the front steps. We would stretch out our legs and lean against the parapet and continue the discussion from earlier in the day.

In the past, the topic of conversation seldom diverged from the latest fashion, the cutest boys, or the coolest song on the radio. This year we found ourselves more in tune with life beyond our junior high. The following year we would be in high school.

Claire and Debbie would follow their siblings to the public school two blocks down the street. Lynn's family sent her five older brothers and sisters to the Catholic high school in the neighboring town. I seemed to be the only one destined to a life of spinsterhood by being sent to Catholic Girls' Academy.

"My mother thinks she can protect my virtue by eliminating boys from my life," I told my friends. "I'll never have a boyfriend."

The thought always brought me to tears. I would never experience the anticipation of my date arriving to take me to the prom or being able to hang out by the water fountain coyly waiting for my crush to walk by.

I begged and pleaded and came up with dozens of excuses as to why I should be spared that fate.

"None of my friends were going there," I would tearfully tell my mother. "I will have to take the bus!"

"¡No, ya basta!"

"But the girls at CGA *son sinvergüenza*." That line of reasoning got me a slap in the face. Argument over.

"You know the tuition at CGA is really expensive," Lynn offered.

"I know, I tried that argument already."

"What about the fact that your brother is already going to Monroe High? Tell her he can keep an eye on you."

"Eddie? Are you kidding? My mom doesn't trust him to watch out for himself."

"We still have almost a whole year. We'll think of something," Debbie reassured me. I appreciated their support, but I knew I was destined to wither away in a Catholic girls' school for four years. I was certain the uniform included a chastity belt.

Looking at Debbie across from me on the top step of the veranda, I remembered that I didn't like her when I first came to Saint Benedict's. She was very quiet and wrote very neatly, so all the nuns liked her. She had short brown hair and brown eyes. I didn't think she was very pretty, but she had a beauty mark on the left side of her face just like Marilyn Monroe. Plus, she knew the answer to every question, probably because she did all

her homework every night. I found that level of academic devotion annoying.

Sometime around the fourth grade, Sheila Kramer accused me of cutting in line to play tetherball. It was always difficult to tell who was in line because everyone was always saving someone's place. I was of the opinion that if you couldn't stand in line, you lost your place. Sheila was of a contrary opinion and proceeded to inform me that I was wrong.

"Who died and made you queen?" I wanted to know.

"I've been here longer than you, you dirty Mexican."

"You're the dirty one. You've got B.O."

"Why don't you go back to Mexico where you came from?"

"I was born in El Paso. That's in Texas, stupid."

"Really? Did your mom swim the river, wetback?"

The cut was deep, and I didn't have a good comeback, so I walked away. I didn't want to play tetherball anyway. Luckily the bell rang, and recess was over. The next day I sat under an olive tree for a solitary game of jacks. Debbie came over and sat next to me. "Did you know that a mother bat gives birth to a baby bat that is forty percent of her body size?" she asked me.

"No. I didn't know that."

"Bats are good for nature because they eat bugs."

"I didn't know that either."

"We went to Montana last summer, and I learned all about bats when we went into the Lewis and Clark caverns."

"Really, that's cool," I said. "But how do you remember all that stuff?"

"I don't know," she shrugged her shoulders as she picked up the jacks. "I've always been able to remember stuff."

"Did you know that Montana means mountain in Spanish? Montaña."

"That's cool, too. Will you teach me Spanish?"

"Okay!" From then on we were friends.

"Letty. Letty! Stop daydreaming," Claire said. "Let's come here every day."

"I can't come every day. I've got softball practice twice a week and my piano lessons on Tuesdays, but we'll come a lot," Lynn promised. Since she discovered the house, we naturally let her make the rules. Awaiting the end of each school day now became nearly unbearable. Each held the possibility that we would visit our house. The school activities that occurred with such regularity were designed to weave into our fabric the traits the good sisters wanted us to have. But my senses were awakened to what lay outside my sheltered life, and in this, I was a willing pupil.

Being a Catholic school meant that there was a church on the school grounds, or as some parishioners would prefer to say, there was a school on the grounds of the church. In either case, the events of the church were subject to our notice and usual indifference. Every year in April the second graders would line up in two perfect little rows, one for the boys and one for the girls, for the walk to church to make their first confessions. I remember when I was in such a line, practicing over and over, "Bless me Father for I have sinned, and these are my sins." The worry about getting it wrong and, therefore committing an additional sin, caused great anxiety in my seven-year-old mind. But it had to be done so that the following week with a pure soul, I could don the white dress and veil in which I would make my First Communion.

My mother worked on my communion dress for weeks, hand stitching every detail and worrying that my tanned legs would detract from the image of purity and innocence she hoped to achieve. She held onto the belief that fairness of complexion equated a high degree of refinement and social standing. If I were to ever marry into a respectable family, I would have to do everything possible to keep my skin milky white. I was forced to soak in a hot bathtub and scrub my knees raw in an effort to lighten my skin. I wondered if other Mexican girls had this problem with dark knees and if scrubbing did any good.

The second most important event that took place at the church was Confirmation. This was the sacrament where we would renew our devotion to the Catholic faith. The Bishop did the Confirmations, and since he only came around once every two years, the seventh and eighth graders were Confirmed together. Besides, Monsignor Mullins was too old anyway. He'd probably drop something sacred or fall asleep during the reading from the Gospel like Sister Agnes did every Sunday.

Monsignor Mullins was the one who came in during class to hand out the report cards at the end of each quarter. Of course, we all stood when he entered the classroom to show our respect. When given permission to sit, we were still as he called each name and inspected our grades before handing us our report cards.

"Excellent," Monsignor Mullins would say with a smile when he shook hands with the smart kids who got all A's like Debbie and Peter Byers.

The rest of us were just handed our report card after he called our names. I felt badly for Douglas and George who got straight F's every quarter, every year.

"Try to do better," Monsignor Mullins always asked them. They never did, or maybe they never could. There was no such thing as special needs kids in the early 70s. You were either smart, normal, or dumb.

The fear of getting an F on my report card was another one of those things that filled my young mind with dread and caused intestinal turmoil. Luckily, I never got anything lower than a D and that was only once. It was in spelling in the fourth grade. I tried to get my mom to help me study, but she either didn't know the words or I couldn't understand her pronunciation in English. For months I was afraid I would flunk and be humiliated for the rest of my life. It was one of the great tragedies of my childhood up to that point. I cannot imagine what Douglas and George had to endure year after year with straight F's.

The church had its share of funerals. We often watched with morbid curiosity as the coffin was taken out of the hearse and rolled into the church followed by the grieving widow, parents, or children. People had to die. How else were they going to get to Heaven?

"Death is a joyous occasion when the pain and suffering of this world will end and eternal happiness with God will begin," the sisters would tell us. "But only if you prove yourself worthy in this life on Earth, because only the righteous earn their place at the right hand of God."

That's what we were told and what we were supposed to believe. But death was scary. It was sad. No one I knew wanted to die.

That fall, I went to a funeral and, although I didn't even know the boy, his death made me keenly aware of what was real. Tim Hennessey had been in my class for as long as I had, and I didn't even know he had a brother. Tim was absent from school one day, which no one took any particular notice of except for Destructo as she was taking attendance.

Later that afternoon, the principal, Sister Mary Louise, came into our classroom for what we thought was her weekly visit. The entire class stood until given permission to be seated. Usually she would lecture us on proper etiquette or personal hygiene for thirty minutes before moving on to visit with the lower grades.

"Good morning class. Please take your seats. I have something I'd like to talk to you about." Holding her hands in front of her, Sister stood in the front of the room. I could tell something was wrong from the tone in her voice.

"You all know Tim Hennessey?" she paused. "His brother, Daniel, is in the army. Daniel has been killed in action in Vietnam." The room grew very still.

A war was raging in Vietnam. I remembered seeing the news broadcasts of soldiers fighting, and Vietnamese people crying and screaming amidst the rubble and ruin that was once their village. Of course, I knew that soldiers die in wars, but not anyone I knew. Not the brother of someone in my class.

"The funeral will take place in our church next week, and this class will go to show your respect for Tim and his parents.

"This is a very serious matter. I expect all of you to be on your best behavior. Nothing short of appropriate conduct will be tolerated. Am I clear?"

"Yes, Sister," we said in unison.

"Now let us bow our heads and pray for the soul of Daniel Hennessey."

During recess, Tim's brother was all everyone talked about.

"I feel so bad for Tim."

"And his parents. I can't imagine how his parents are feeling right now."

"My uncle was killed in the war way back when I was a little kid. All my mom did was cry for months and months!"

"I have two cousins in the marines. They're both at boot camp in South Carolina right now."

"I can't believe that Sister had to tell us how to behave during the funeral."

"Yeah, we're not that stupid."

"Well, some kids are always misbehaving, even during Mass."

"Yeah, but still. This is a funeral. We're eighth graders—not little kids."

So I wasn't the only one offended by Sister's warning. But the warning got my attention and at that moment the war became real.

"Why is there a war in Vietnam anyway?"

"Because the soldiers need something to do."

"So maybe we don't need soldiers."

"Then who will protect us against the Nazis?"

"That was World War II! You mean the Viet Cong."

"Why do we need to be protected from the Viet Cong? Who are they?"

All we knew was that good had to triumph over evil. Every night we watched television shows like *Combat*, *The Rat Patrol*, and *Hogan's Heroes*. The Germans and the Japanese had to be defeated in World War II to keep the world safe for democracy. It had something to do with dominos and that the Soviets were going to drop "the bomb" on us any minute. We practiced saving ourselves twice yearly by scrunching up under our desks and protecting our heads with our arms. This war was on television every night, and everything was one and the same.

In the next few days, we learned a lot about the war.

"My brother got drafted," Tim told the kids at recess when he came back to school.

"But I thought you couldn't get drafted if you are in college."

"You can now. My brother was a junior back in Wisconsin, but his student deferment got cancelled."

"No way!" A few boys got worried looks.

"My parents said it was because he got arrested when he protested against the invasion of Cambodia."

"What? Cambodia? I thought the war was in Vietnam."

"Wait! What? Me, too."

"Yeah!"

A quick check of the map in the back of our geography books, however, clarified the situation—the world was coming to an end.

The news on television over the next few weeks confirmed it. East Pakistan and West Pakistan were at war. People were firebombing in the South and across the ocean in Northern Ireland. Parents and students in Boston were rioting over busing the white kids to the black schools. The prisoners had taken over Attica prison in New York, and Charles Manson was on death row. Walking home from school one day my friends and I

calculated how old we would be at the turn of the century, the year 2000. I would be forty-two. I wasn't sure I'd live to be that old.

AFTON

FELLOWS

The visits to our house took us away from the horrors of the world. With every visit our curiosity about its origins became more intense. We wanted to know who built it, and who had lived there. Why was the house abandoned? Who did it belong to now?

"I bet if we went to the historical society, they could tell us," Claire said.

"Where's the historical society?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe it's downtown in City Hall."

"I bet the city library would have stuff about it in the city history department." Debbie knew almost everything.

The following week Lynn got her mom to pick us all up after school and drop us off at the city library to do research for a history project. It wasn't a lie. We just weren't doing it for school.

"Do you have any stuff on city history?" Debbie asked the librarian at the circulation desk.

"Historical archives are on the second floor," replied the tall blonde with cleavage and too much blue eye shadow standing behind the desk.

"I thought librarians were supposed to be little old ladies with glasses and a bun," Claire said as we headed toward the stairs. Sure enough, the librarian in historical archives looked like she belonged there, gray hair, bifocals, and a dowager's hump.

"What can I help you girls with?" she asked in a raspy voice.

"We want to know the history of a house in this city," Lynn replied. We weren't sure how much information we could give her without revealing the secret.

"What is the house called?"

"We don't know."

"What's the address?"

"We don't know that either."

She looked at us with a bit of suspicion in her eyes. I didn't blame her. We weren't trying to be rude, but we were being evasive. We had a secret to protect. If I were her, I would have thought we were up to something, too.

"Okay, then. Where is this house located?" We looked at each other not sure of what to say. "Do you not know that either?"

"It's located across the street from Saint Benedict's Catholic School, between the school and Case Memorial Hospital," I finally admitted.

"Oh, you're looking for information on the Fellows' house. You should have said that to begin with."

We looked at each other with the same question in our eyes: How did she know?

"Let me show you the local history section. We have a good collection of Gerard Case's personal papers and photographs of the estate. The property is owned by Case Memorial Hospital." She showed us a file cabinet. "If you need to use the microfiche viewer, let me know, and I'll get you set up."

"What did she say?" I whispered to Lynn a bit bewildered.

"We don't want to look at tiny fish," Claire whispered to us all.



Of course it all made sense when she opened a drawer filled with rolls of film. Once given access to all the documents, we quickly pieced together the history of the house and its occupants. There were newspaper articles about the groundbreaking for the hospital. An engagement announcement dated 1888, included a photograph of a pretty young woman with dark hair. There were many photographs of garden parties, hunting parties, and the town's first dignitaries lined up with the somber expressions so characteristic of daguerreotypes. Letters and missives took up an entire book titled, *Personal Correspondences*. By the time Lynn's mom returned to pick us up, we had discovered the story of the house.

The Case Memorial Hospital Foundation owned the house and all the surrounding land. The hospital's founder, Gerard Case, built the house for his daughter, Afton, and her new husband in 1889. Case made his fortune shipping Dr. Tichenor's Antiseptic to the West and selling it to small town doctors after the Civil War. The antiseptic was credited with saving lives

during the war, including that of Gerard Case. He was wounded in the Battle of Bentonville just one month before the war ended. Barely making it back home to Tennessee after his recovery, he knew his second chance at life would be wasted if he stayed.

Moving to New Orleans put him in the fortuitous position of addressing the demands of an expanding west. There is where he worked with Dr. Tichenor, marketing and shipping medical supplies and equipment through the busy port. Within ten years he was quite a wealthy man. He himself moved west and founded the hospital in the town where he finally settled down.

Afton's future husband, Cedric Fellows, was another self-made man who capitalized on the insatiate needs of a growing nation. An east coast educated engineer, he met Afton Case at her cousin's birthday reception. Due to social strategizing by the cousin, the not completely spontaneous meeting resulted in a courtship, engagement, and wedding that all took place in less than six months. Her father's wedding present took much longer to build. With Gerard's money and Cedric's skills at engineering, they built a house to rival the medieval manor houses of Europe.

The foundation was made of stone, and only solid timbers brought in on wagons pulled by teams of eight horses were used to frame the massive structure. Stained glass windows, mahogany doors, and Italian marble were shipped in and installed by the best craftsmen that could be found.

Afton and Cedric lived happily in the house for several years. A son was born there on a warm summer dawn, and a second son followed almost exactly a year later. But after the birth of their third son, Cedric became restless. His love of adventure was renewing its grasp. He began to accept commissions for larger projects further from home.

At first he left only for short periods of time to build a bridge or oversee the construction of a tunnel, but as the jobs neared completion, his ambivalence between returning home and seeking new projects worsened. It wasn't that he didn't love Afton and the boys, but he felt claustrophobic at the thought of coming home to the same house where life was so predictable. His anxiety was only abated when he stood in direct contact with sunlight and with a ticket in his hand. He felt the salvation of his life and career was achieved when he was dispatched with a team of engineers to work on the Panama Canal in 1905.

The separation would be difficult for Afton, but she was not one to interfere with the business of men. Afton had already spent many months alone tending her three children. She would never admit to anyone, not even herself, that she secretly lamented having married a man who failed to provide the day-to-day fatherly guidance needed by her growing sons.

However, she was also not one to sit idly by and bemoan her misfortunes. Engaged in all aspects of the local community, she filled her days with philanthropic endeavors. As vice president of the local chapter of the Ladies' Aid Society, she organized fundraisers for widows and orphans, hosted the Wednesday Morning Tea Club more often than was her duty, and was diligent in raising money for the Universal Literacy League. But above all else, she loved the time she had to fuss about her home. Financial resources were such that mail order catalogs arrived regularly, and she filled her home with the knick-knacks, doilies, and extravagances from the fashionable stores back east. The house was hers in that she supervised the placement of every rug, perfectly matched the color of the portieres to the wallpaper, and arranged the flowers in every vase. Her anxiety over the imminent departure of her husband was soothed by her plan to completely redecorate the house as a surprise upon his return.

Cedric left in May of 1905 and arrived at the Canal Zone ready to start work with unbridled enthusiasm. The heat, the humidity, and the mosquitoes only added fodder to his excitement. This was his life's dream. He would be part of history—instrumental in one of the greatest undertakings of mankind. Cedric arrived with a Panama hat on his head, a valise in his hand, and a smile on his face. He was assigned to his room in the engineer's quarters, but the ferocious heat allowed him little sleep that first night. But he was undeterred in his excitement, and the next day he met his team of fellow engineers and set off to work. That night he sent his first letter to Afton.

My Dearest Wife,

I have arrived. I disembarked from my ship in the darkest of nights and had to wait until sun-up to behold this land. Oh, what a glorious place this is! Vegetation and creatures that you have only seen in little Harland's picture books. The heat is sent in by the breath of a dragon,

but I give it little notice as I am in my element. What a wonderful thing I will help to create for the betterment of the world. We must not be selfish and regret this separation for this world is changing quickly, my Dear, and you and I must do our part for the sake of our sons. I will make you and the boys proud.

With my most profound love, Cedric



Stricken with malaria, he died three weeks later. Loyally, Afton never remarried. Her sons remained nearby until they too were lured by the sirens of adventure and were killed in those noble pursuits of men. World War I took both Eben and Wade. Harland, devoted to his mother, resisted for as long as he could, but having his father's spirit, he left for Spain in 1936 to fight with the Spanish Loyalists against the Fascists and never returned. Having survived all her children, Afton lived alone in the house until her death in 1949.

Since learning of its history, it was from then on "Afton's house."

"Her house has been empty for twenty-two years," I said with a bit of sadness. "It has been unloved and uncared for for such a long time. I bet she would want us to get inside. She would want people like us to bring it back to life."

"We could clean it up, bring in some old furniture," Lynn suggested.

"Whenever we're here it's like the rest of the world doesn't exist," I admitted. The war, racism, smog were problems from some other universe —nonexistent to me when I could sit on the steps of the veranda and see clear blue sky peering through the leaves on the trees. We lived by our pact that the house would remain a secret. No one—parents, siblings, teachers, or friends—must ever learn about its existence.

But sitting on the veranda and daydreaming wasn't enough. Getting in became a priority, an urgency that permeated my every waking thought as well as my dreams. We went there immediately after school on a regular basis. At first we stayed no longer than thirty to forty minutes before going straight home. We reasoned that we spent about that much time chatting and

gossiping each day after school anyway before actually leaving. Since my brothers and I routinely arrived home at different times, the discrepancy was hardly noticed. But after a while, Lynn, Debbie, Claire, and I stayed longer and longer. Forty-five minutes turned into an hour and a half. By late October, I was getting home just before dark. My mother, fearing for my virtue, scolded me and demanded explanations as to my whereabouts.

"Have you been talking to boys?"

"No, Debbie McClain got a new puppy, and we all went over to play with it." Since my mother didn't speak English, she had no way of calling Debbie's mother to verify the information, and I felt no remorse in the lie. Mrs. McClain didn't work and stayed home to care for eight kids. In my mother's eyes, this made her a respectable woman and a good Catholic, so my mother backed off. But I realized that I needed to be more careful, yet I also needed more time at Afton's house.

I grew impatient to explore every nook and cranny and imagine the rooms filled with furniture and photographs of Afton and Cedric on their wedding day. I imagined framed pictures of three little boys on the piano—Eben, Wade, and baby Harland. Finding a way in couldn't be done in a few stolen moments twice a week. Still, we made our pilgrimage and learned as much as we could about Afton through her house. And with every visit our knowledge grew.

We didn't give up the hope of one day finding a way inside. The front door was just begging us to find a key. "Open me, open me," it shouted. By peering in the windows we discovered much about what life may have been like in the house so many years ago.

"There's sunlight in the middle," said Claire.

"Maybe it has a skylight."

"But there's a bunch of bushes and stuff," said Lynn.

"Oh, it's like my *abuelita*'s house in Mexico. It's a courtyard. All the rooms are connected to it."

"Like The Valley View Apartments!"

"Is that what the houses are like in Cuba?"

"I don't remember. I was only three when we left."

"Is that a bench?"

"Where?"

"Next to those French doors. See, it's half covered by that azalea bush."

This discovery provided me with ample material for imagination. Lovers from long ago would secretly meet in the moonlight holding hands and stealing kisses. I imagined myself a hundred years back in time sitting on a bench holding a parasol while drinking tea and reading *The Secret Garden*.

Of course the courtyard was inaccessible to us because it was entirely surrounded by the house. This only added to our desire and impatience in penetrating this beguiling dwelling.

Unlike the front, the back of the house was a single story. A circular structure with a cone shaped roof connected the east and west wings of the house. From what we could tell it was just one large room. We cupped our hands around our eyes and pressed our faces against the windows. The round ceiling was covered with a most detailed and colorful painting of the sun, still bright and clean, unfaded by the real thing.

"That's so cool."

"Let's call this the sunroom."

"What do you think this room was for?"

"Maybe it was a party room? This is where Afton held her tea parties."

"Maybe this is where she held séances."

"She didn't hold séances!"

"How do you know? Maybe after all her children died she hired a medium to talk to them. She was loaded. She could hire anyone she wanted."

"Remember, Debbie, when you spent the night at my house and we conjured the ghost of Bloody Mary?" Claire asked.

"You didn't conjure up any ghost!"

"I swear we did. Tell them Debbie."

"If you look into a mirror and say 'Bloody Mary' real fast twenty times, you can see her face in the mirror."

"And we did," Claire said. "Tell them, Debbie."

"Actually, I had my eyes closed," Debbie admitted. "You screamed and scared her away. At least that's what you told me."

"When we get in, we'll conjure up *La Llorona*," I offered. "She won't get scared away."

"Who?"

"The crying woman. She goes around trying to steal kids to replace the ones she drowned."

"On purpose?" asked Lynn.

"Yeah, because she was jealous that her husband left her for another woman. She's been crying about it ever since."

"That's sick," Debbie said.

"Well I didn't make it up!" I said. "But you know what would be better? Instead of conjuring up the dead we can cast spells. We can end the war and achieve world peace."

Claire jumped in, "We can end starvation in China and clean up all the pollution."

"And then we can make love potions. When we get to high school, we can get the foxy guys to fall in love with us!"

My excitement about the house was almost too much to contain. This was a full-grown dollhouse, and we were the dolls. Our mutual secret bonded us, and, like a lot of secrets, it gave us a feeling of wickedness, a sense of stepping into the wild side like the song said, outside the confines of the establishment. We were trespassing, lying to our parents, and discovering a passion in our souls. We were hippies and radicals itching to start something new in a place that belonged to us and no one else. It was a great time to be alive!

Walking back around the sunroom, it was our most wonderful fortune that Lynn discovered a trellis butted along a back wall that we had previously overlooked.

"Wait a minute you guys," she said as she inspected the trellis. "If we could climb this trellis and reach the cone roof, we could walk around to the side above the courtyard."

"Maybe there's a way to climb down from there."

"Surely there has to be an unlocked door or an open window to get in from the courtyard."

Considering the possibilities, we decided it was worth a try. The question was who would try it first?

"If the house is ninety years old, the trellis probably is, too. It's probably way too rotted to climb."

"Yeah, it will break the minute you step on it"

"But look how thick this vine is. We'll just climb on this," Lynn suggested pointing to an interesting looking vine that had woven its way around the brittle wood.

"It is at least ten feet from the ground to the eaves of the cone roof. If the trellis breaks, and we fall, we could break something. Then what? Whose

parents do we go and get?" Claire asked. Using a thirteen-year-old's logic, we pondered a solution.

"Claire should go first. She's the tallest," said Debbie.

"Lynn should go first. She's the smallest and strongest," I countered.

"Yeah, if it breaks with her on it, it definitely won't hold the rest of us." Claire had also been analyzing the situation.

"And what if it does break with me on it?"

"We'll catch you."

"Yeah, right!"

"Oh, quit being such a baby."

We finally convinced her to give it a try. Debbie would go next, then me, and then Claire. Once we were all up, we could then assess the situation. Lynn climbed the trunk of the vine for the first four feet, and then she had to start relying on the wood of the trellis. From the ground, we all gave her instructions as to where to put her hands and feet.

"Put your foot over there."

"Which foot over where?"

"Your left foot next to those leaves."

"Which leaves?"

"The leaves by your left foot!" So went the directions. Lynn's success would bring us one step closer to our goal. The higher she got, the slower she moved. Her reluctance was fueled by fear of failure more than fear of injury.

"We'll catch you," we assured her, "you're almost there."

Lynn lifted her eyes to see the eave of the sunroom within her reach. She lifted her right leg up to the last rung of the trellis and slowly rose to a point where she could place both hands firmly on the cone roof. She lifted herself up like a competitive swimmer exiting the pool, pushing with her arms while twisting her body to land sitting on the roof, feet dangling in the air.

"What can you see?" we shouted in unison.

"There's a balcony on the other side. I can see an open door."

"Yay!" We jumped up with excitement while clutching each other's arms.

The rest of us wasted no time in climbing the trellis to join her. One at a time we reached the roof and secured a spot. Seeing the open door gave us hope that the house was penetrable. The obvious problem was how to get to it. This would take courage and more time than we presently had. We would

have to come back on a weekend, but none of us could disappear for an extended length of time without a legitimate explanation for our parents, so we came up with a brilliant plan.

"I'll tell my mom I'm spending the afternoon at Claire's house, and Claire, you tell your mom you're spending the afternoon at my house. Letty and Debbie, you guys tell your moms the same thing."

"Yeah! Lynn you're a genius. I can't believe no one ever thought of that before."

"Okay, we'll meet at the wall this Saturday at noon."

"I can't wait."

"This is so cool." We practically danced our way back to the wall pretending to be Crosby, Stills, and Nash singing "Our House."

GROUNDED

By the time I got home that afternoon, it was almost dark. My mom went berserk the moment I walked in the front door. "What are you thinking coming home so late? I thought you were dead. *Estas castigada*."

"No! I can't be grounded. I was at Debbie's house."

"Mentirosa. No you weren't. Her mother called here looking for her. ¿Dónde estabas?"

Busted!

I ignored her, ran to my room and slammed the door. I called Debbie and found out that she was also grounded. A first for her. When I called Claire, her mom wouldn't let her come to the phone. Lynn never got grounded, but in any case, I wasn't going to be able to go to the house that weekend. I couldn't believe my mother could be so mean!

Angry and alone, I picked up the macramé belt I had been working on and turned on the radio. At thirteen, music was starting to speak to me. I wasn't always sure what it was saying, but a mood wafted through my ears and lodged in my heart. I tuned in to my favorite radio station eager to listen to the music of the Carpenters, Three Dog Night, or John Denver. But Carole King was by far my favorite singer. With the little money that I managed to find and save, I bought her *Tapestry* album and played it over and over. I would sing along to all the songs every night while I was in my room pretending to do my homework.

The tunes about love and heartbreak competed with the anti-war songs on the radio. "The Universal Soldier" and "Eve of Destruction" were common songs that permeated the airwaves. They made me think about the images I saw on the news. But what I saw and what I heard didn't always coincide. Marvin Gaye was wondering "What's Going On." And so was I. Being Catholic, I assumed the mention of the father in the lyrics was referring to God. *Our Father who art in Heaven*. But it soon started to make sense.

On the television news, President Nixon announced that 45,000 U.S. troops had been withdrawn from Vietnam, but we soon learned that

American B-52s were increasing air raids against the communists in Cambodia and Laos. Lynn's dad told her that "secret papers" reported that the war was bigger than the government was telling us.

"Where did your dad get secret papers?" I asked.

"They were on the television news and in the newspaper."

"Why would they be in the newspaper if they're secret?"

"There're not secret anymore."

"No kidding!"

President Nixon had promised to end the war, but he was making it worse. The President lying to us was incomprehensible to me. Didn't he know lying was a sin?

"The U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops has issued a resolution opposing the war," Sister Frances Joseph announced during our history class. Remembering the funeral of Dan Hennessey, we all looked at Tim.

"As Catholics," she continued, "We follow the decisions of our leaders. We need to pray that the war ends soon." Blythe James raised her hand. "Yes, Blythe."

"So, being Catholic, we're now officially against the war, right? So does that mean we should go out and join the war protesters?"

"Aren't they getting arrested?" Debbie asked.

"You can be opposed to the war without breaking the law," Sister Frances Joseph said. "Remember your history lesson: Freedom of Assembly and Petition for Redress of Grievances. It's in the Constitution."

"But what if we get drafted? Should we go to Canada?" worried Douglas.

"You're not going to Canada. If we just keep praying, the war will be over soon. You have to be eighteen to get drafted, so you don't have to worry about it."

Hadn't we been praying for the war to end for years? I was sure that every soldier who was over there getting shot at was praying for the war to end. It hadn't worked yet. Why should we keep thinking it would? I didn't raise my hand to ask Sister that question. I knew what her answer would be. Have faith.

The world just kept getting more confusing. I felt like a spectator at a tennis match. *I pledge allegiance to the flag, I believe in one God, The Universal Soldier, Thou shalt not kill, The Eve of Destruction, We've Only*

Just Begun, Creator of Heaven and Earth, Imagine there's no Heaven, and to the Republic for which is stands, Honor thy father and thy mother, Your sons and daughters are beyond your command, Bless the Beast and the Children, One nation under God, Above us only sky, with liberty and justice, Hell no we won't go, Where Have All the Flowers Gone, the answer is blowin' in the wind.

Stuck in my room that day, I had time to think, but at thirteen how could I possibly know how much the world was screwing me up. The confusion was like reading a story with words that I didn't understand. My mind would wander and eventually I would come to the end of the chapter with no clue as to what I had just read. I started to think that my life was becoming like that. I was moving through a fog. How could I keep going on without knowing what was happening? I felt compelled to take a stand on something—something important and life changing. What I really wanted to do was to join the women's libbers, except I didn't want to burn my bra because it was brand new.

I didn't think it was fair that all three of my brothers got to play little league, and all I got to do was watch. Saint Benedict's had a girls' volleyball team, but my mom wouldn't let me join. She said sports weren't ladylike. In fact, there wasn't much that I wanted to do that was ladylike. I remembered that when I was in the fifth grade a local music school put on a program at Saint Benedict's to recruit new students. The man from Fender's Music Store had a whole assortment of instruments on the stage in the auditorium. After playing a flute, a violin, and the drums, he asked for a volunteer from the audience. Of course all of us kids were nearly catapulted out of our seats by raising our hands faster and higher than the kid next to us.

"Oooh, oooh, oooh, me, me, me!"

Something happened that day that had never happened before. He picked me. He pointed a finger at me and said, "This young lady in the third row. Yes, you." Timidly, I walked up the stairs of the stage trying to hide both my nervousness and enthusiasm. "What's your name?"

"Leticia Marquez," I stammered.

"Do you know how to play any musical instruments?" All I managed to do was shake my head. "Do you want to?"

"Yes," I squeaked out.

"Okay, let's get started." He picked up a big golden tube shaped like a giant J. It had a bunch of little buttons and a black tip.

"Do you know what this is?"

"No."

"It's a saxophone. Place this strap around your neck. Now put your right hand here and your left hand here. This is the mouthpiece." I was standing on the stage and the entire school was looking at me. Every kid in the school was going to watch me play the saxophone! My hands trembled, as my life was about to take on new meaning. I was about to perform on stage. The world stood still.

"Put this in your mouth, relax, and blow, but not too hard."

My lungs constricted, but I managed to take in whatever breath I could, and blew into the saxophone. Nothing happened. Three hundred sets of eyes stared at me. I was mortified. Beads of sweat emerged on my face that I could feel was changing color.

"That's okay," the man smiled. "Try again." This time I concentrated. Again I inhaled and gently blew into the saxophone. In answer to my prayers, a sound came out. "Terrific. Now place your fingers here and when you blow, hold them down for one second and then let go." I did as instructed. Sound again! Changing sound. I played notes! For the first time in my life I played a musical instrument and a real one at that, not a toy harmonica like the one in the Cracker Jack box.

"Let's hear it for Leticia." The room applauded as I quickly returned to my seat. I got there walking on sunshine, a smile revealing my crooked front teeth. I couldn't wait to get home. I was going to take saxophone lessons! I loved the saxophone. No one would ever have to scold me to practice like for my ballet lessons. I couldn't wait to tell my mother.

"¿Qué estás loca?" my mother said. "The saxophone is a boy's instrument. Why can't you be a lady and want to take piano lessons?" my mother admonished me in Spanish.

"Okay! I'll take piano lessons," I responded instantly. So much for my devotion to the saxophone.



"¿Qué estás loca?" This was her favorite question. "We can't afford a piano."

Monday morning came much too quickly as usual, but at least I wasn't grounded any more. I was looking forward to returning to Afton's house after school. My thoughts focused on the open door we discovered on the balcony as I trudged to school like a backpacker in the snow. But I would have to wait for school to let out before even the possibility of going back to Afton's house.

A school day lasted for decades, and a week was a century. Even with the changes that each new school year brought, the days soon became banal. English class was now called literature. We had finally moved past the agonizing chore of grammar and parts of speech. No more memorizing prepositions and conjunctions. No more underlining the direct object and circling the transitive verb. The subject and the predicate could be forgotten. We were going to learn about plot and theme, character development and setting, point of view, and the difference between the protagonist and the antagonist. *Holy moley!* I remember thinking. *Is there no end to the number of things that the world expected us to know?*

Mr. Chappel was another new teacher that year. He was a young man, not unhandsome, but not exactly Paul McCartney. Some of the silly girls had a crush on him, but he was not the focus of my exploding hormones. He was the homeroom teacher for the seventh grade and the new literature teacher for the eighth. The first thing he taught us was how to pronounce his name. "It's CHAPpel. Like the place where you go to pray, not ChaPELL." We just looked at him. Never before had any of us had a man for a teacher. We were accustomed to nuns with long black habits and rosary beads that click-clacked ever so quietly as they walked.

When I was in the first grade, I didn't think nuns had feet, but tendrils like Morticia from *The Addams Family*. We had the occasional lay teacher like Mrs. O'Grady and Mrs. Merry, but never a man. Mr. Chappel wore a tweed jacket with a light green shirt and a dark green tie. His Wallabees were well worn. We noticed that he was left-handed, so when he wrote on the chalkboard, his sentences all went downhill. His room was barren, completely lacking in decorative bulletin boards and inspirational posters. Besides the green chalkboard, only a crucifix hung on the front wall.

"So what do you think of the new guy?" Lynn asked as we left his room that first day.

"I'll let you know after he gives us homework," I remember saying. As it turned out, Mr. Chappel wasn't so bad.

The next hour we had history. Sister Frances Joseph was a force to be reckoned with. There was no talking, no note passing, nor sleeping in her class. One misstep and she gave a look to the offender that made him or her pray for salvation. This year we were studying American history. We were learning about our founding fathers, the settling of the West, and the white man's burden. Although I didn't know it then, everything was presented through the lens of fatalism. Our victories in Europe and the Pacific were predestined, the will of God.

"The United States was designed by God to be a world power, and we should give thanks to the Lord every night that He chose us to live here," Sister would tell us. But, by eighth grade we were becoming wiser. "Question Authority" the bumper sticker said. Hands shot up ready for a retort.

"The slaves probably weren't real happy to be living here."

"My cousin in Mexico said that he was going to get all his friends together and form an army. Then they are going to come and take back all the land the *Gringos* stole from them."

"Weren't the Indians chosen by God to live here first?"

"When we were at Mount Rushmore last summer some of the Indians there said that the government lies to us about how they are being cheated. That's why they took over Alcatraz."

Sister listened to our comments patiently, but she was unfazed. When she was ready to respond the room fell silent.

"There are a lot of evil people in the world. God gives man free will so he can make his own decisions. Some of those decisions are evil, and those men will be punished and spend the rest of eternity in Hell. We don't know what God's plan is. We have to have faith knowing that what He does is just and good.

"God has helped the Indians by sending missionaries to convert them to Catholicism, so that they can be saved and go to Heaven. The slaves were freed because God chose Abraham Lincoln to become president and free them. But life on earth is just a test of our faith. Once we've proven ourselves to be good and obedient to the will of God, He will reward us with a place in Heaven."

Okay, we couldn't argue with her. That was all true. God did send President Lincoln to end slavery, and He helped us defeat Hitler, but something just didn't feel right. After class, the discussion continued out on the playground a bit more heatedly.

"If God gave man free will, then why is man punished for what he does?"

"Because man should know the difference between right and wrong. It's in the Ten Commandments."

"What about the people who don't believe in the Ten Commandments?"

"Then they're going to Hell. That's the whole idea. If you don't believe, you're going to be punished."

"But what can a man do that is so bad that he needs to spend all eternity in Hell?"

"Are you kidding? Hitler! He killed six million people."

"Isn't God loving and forgiving? Didn't Sister Frances Joseph say God loves everyone, even Hitler?"

"But all eternity? Can't he spend a couple million years in purgatory until he's forgiven?"

"Purgatory is for repentant sinners who are trying to get into Heaven. You stay in purgatory until you're forgiven. Hitler will never be forgiven."

"God loves everyone, even people who are in Hell."

"But if God loves you, why would He want you to burn in Hell for eternity?"

"If you commit sins, you are going to Hell. Case closed!"

"Then go to confession and get forgiven."

"Why are you always causing problems?"

"I'm just trying to figure it all out."

"What's to figure out? It's all very simple."

"No, it isn't."

"Well then, you're stupid."

"You're stupid!"

The bell rang and the round was over. We all went in to factor equations. But I couldn't concentrate on math problems with the whole God's will issue and Destructo's pantyhose swishing against her thighs as she walked back and forth checking our work. Kids were always copying each other's homework and stealing gum from the liquor store. There wasn't one kid

that didn't lie to his or her parents or cheat in school. The newspapers were filled with stories about murders and robberies.

Were we all going to spend eternity in Hell, or was it as simple as asking for forgiveness? I thought I'd better go to confession on Sunday just to be safe.

That afternoon my thoughts returned to Afton's house. For some strange reason I thought life would make more sense once we got in. Maybe God put the house there to test our will. Could we be trusted to keep a secret? Could we overcome our fears? I thought about Afton Fellows. I sure hoped she was Catholic because I couldn't imagine her anywhere but in Heaven.

ROBIN

DRIVE

My family and I lived in an apartment on Robin Drive. I had never lived in a house, and I secretly yearned to live in idealistic Mayberry with Barney Fife, Andy Taylor, Opie, and Aunt Bee. A place with porch swings and friendly neighbors who waved as they strolled along tree lined streets every evening. Most of the people on Robin Drive lived in apartments, although there were a few houses mixed in here and there. Two buildings up the street lived the Kirtlands—a family with a mom and three kids. The dad "blew his brains out on the front porch," as Lance and his younger brother Kyle told my brothers and me over and over.

Mr. Kirtland was a Vietnam War veteran who came home from the war before my family moved into the neighborhood. He had been dead for over a year when we met Lance and Kyle. When we were with them, we were with him as well. I realize now that he probably suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. Battle fatigue it would have been called back in 1971, but whatever it was called, it plagued his sons as well.

Lance and Kyle were really friends of my younger brothers, Manny and Diego. They were constantly playing army. Sticks, random pieces of wood, or just their arms would serve as rifles or machine guns to kill the enemy. Bullet fire was incessantly simulated by an extensive vocabulary of gunfire. Peow, peow, peow. Wra-te-te-te-te. Bam-bam-bam. Teeoo, teeoo, teeoo.

They played out the death scenes with great dramatic detail. Dying involved throwing up their arms as they instantaneously arched their backs and stood on the tips of their toes. Hitting the ground they went through a series of rolls and tumbles that only ended after a brave attempt to repossess the weapon and fire off one last hero's round. With these antics my brothers were doing what all boys have always done—be boys, rough and tumble—

to feed their innate need for action and struggle. But Lance and Kyle were reliving their father's agony.

Although I can probably guess, I still wonder what happened to him in Vietnam that made him come home and kill himself in front of his family. Those boys were each earning their own Purple Hearts—decorations of the soul for little boys growing up fatherless.

Being one of the few houses on my street, the Kirtland's had a front yard, so their house was the gathering place for most of the kids in the neighborhood. Plus, they had a dog. My brothers and I weren't allowed to have a dog. My mom strictly forbade it. At first I thought it was because we were Mexican and only Americans could have dogs, but then I figured out it was because we lived in an apartment.

The Kirtland's dog, Piper, served as the neighborhood dog for all of us apartment kids. He was a little white cockapoo that could keep up with every pair of roller skates, bike, and skateboard on the block. Lance and Kyle's little sister, Callie, used to wrap him up in a blanket and take him for walks in a stroller. But when he could escape her, he served as the dedicated army dog bringing first aid to the wounded soldiers, or a stalwart companion to castaways on a treacherous deserted island.

Our street was on a hill that gradually bottomed out about one hundred feet from the corner. Those last one hundred feet curved to the right and then rose sharply uphill. It was always a challenge to see if we could go fast enough on our roller skates or our bikes to coast up to the corner. I can't remember ever having made it myself on skates, but on a bike it was a piece of cake. I'd start at the Kirtland's house. Straddling the banana seat of my bike, I'd position the pedals so that I could use my full weight to get started and then build up speed until I was moving faster than I could pedal. The wind would blow my black hair out of my face as I leaned into the handlebars. The trick was to stop pedaling one house before the bottom of the hill and let the momentum take me all the way to the top. We'd spend hours in competition and miraculously no one was ever hit by a car coming out of a blind driveway. Kyle Kirtland broke his left arm once when he rode his bike over a neglected teddy bear lying in the shadow of a telephone pole, but no lives lost.

My family lived in the ground floor apartment in the front of our building. From our living room window we had a view of Robin Drive, so we could see when the neighborhood kids were out. Unfortunately, this also enabled my mother to spy on us. We always checked to see if she or any other parent was watching before playing "Ding Dong Ditch" or climbing trees to drop water balloons at passersby. We never saw her watching, but she always seemed to know what we were up to. Her clandestine skills were amazing. She would have made the CIA proud.

My father worked as the night supervisor at the airport. He didn't have much to do unless something went wrong. Usually he pretty much just checked the badges of the people who worked on the tarmac or kept an eye on the Hare Krishnas to make sure they weren't bothering the passengers too much. We only saw him on weekends, so child rearing was completely left up to my mother. She didn't believe in sparing the rod, although I believe she spared it more for my brothers than for me.

In the apartment directly above ours, lived Chiara and Donald. She was from Italy, but he was just an American. They didn't have any kids, which was good because they weren't married—this was only spoken in whispers—and just lived together like hippies even though they were as old as my parents. My brothers and I never knew what Donald did for a living because he seldom left the apartment, but Chiara worked as a seamstress in a lingerie factory. She was very nice and was always bringing us stuff.

One night she brought my family homemade pizza, just the way they made it in Italy. We never had pizza before and couldn't figure out why anyone would eat something that smelled so potent. Mexican food was spicy, but it didn't smell like Italian food. My brothers and I went to our rooms to bury our noses in our pillows, but my dad had to eat it in front of her to be polite.

On one visit she brought me something she made at work. She was chatting with my mother in our kitchen when I got home from school. "I brought you something sexy," she said to me. They were silky bikini panties to wear under my hip huggers.

"Every girl needs to feel sexy under her clothes," she said in her Italian accent as she gave me a wink.

"They're really groovy. Thank you, Chiara." I couldn't wait to wear them, but one look at my mother I knew that I would never be allowed to. I went to my room and put the panties in my underwear drawer. They mysteriously disappeared the next day.

Life on Robin Drive ceased to exist every morning at seven thirty when we started our walk to school, my little brothers always either far ahead or lagging behind, seldom by my side. It seemed like miles to my third grade legs when I started at Saint Benedict's and the distance didn't get any shorter by the time I reached the eighth. I went through two pairs of white saddle shoes every year, bobby socks in the spring and fall and knee socks in the winter.

The books got heavier as I progressed through the grades, but what they contained never seemed to change—arithmetic problems, the major imports and exports of West Germany, and short stories with questions that had to be answered in complete sentences.

Every year the desks always seemed to fit. It never occurred to me that they grew along with us until I had to take a note to the second grade teacher, Mrs. Merry. When I walked into her classroom, I noticed that the desktops came only to my knees, but accommodated her students quite nicely. Would the desks be bigger next year when I was in high school? I was already taller than my mother. *How does a girl know when she is finished?* I remember



thinking.

The whole grounding incident made us have to readjust our strategy, but we still went to Afton's house after school twice a week, if even for just a few minutes. We would often just sit on the veranda and look out across the front yard at the two trees that were separated by what was left of the brick pathway. Debbie took it upon herself to scan through the pictures of a book on trees to discover that they were giant sycamores.

Their branches must have spread out thirty feet in each direction, and their roots shot up out of the ground like giant octopus tentacles engulfing a ship in a horror movie. Each root sprouted two feet up from the base of the trunk and slowly worked its way back into the ground ten to fifteen feet out. Thousands of birds must have made their homes in those two trees. They were like two bird cities, and if you threw a rock into the branches the noise they made was deafening.

On the west side of the yard, various overgrown shrubs and bushes tried to deny that a well-tended garden once occupied the space. Neglected rose bushes still bloomed white and pink. Squirrels and chipmunks ran wild and unafraid of the ghosts of the rambunctious dogs once owned by the children of the house. Despite the dereliction of human care, or maybe because of it, the setting was soothing. We couldn't help but pretend that we were transported back in time by just sitting on the steps. Our time machine tickled our imagination and stoked our ambition.

"We should make a movie here," Lynn suggested.

"Yeah! I can borrow my father's movie camera," offered Debbie.

"We could dress up in long dresses and carry parasols."

"Let's make a movie about the Civil War!"

"Yeah, we can film Gone with the Wind."

"I want to be Scarlett," I called dibs before anyone else had the chance.

"You can't be Scarlett," Debbie said. "She's white, not Mexican."

"So?" I said with more hurt than I wanted to convey. And then, for some reason I couldn't explain, I became defensive. "I can *act* like I'm Scarlett."

Luckily, Lynn had a better idea. "We'll write our own script," she said, springing up from the step to stand in front of us. "We can be whoever we want. I want to be in a death scene where I get shot and die a slow agonizing death." She held one hand up to her heart while she stretched out her other arm to break her fall. "A soldier will ride up seconds before I succumb to Saint Peter, and hold me in his arms. I'll realize it's my long lost lover. 'Don't leave me, my dearest,' he'll beg as I try to hold on to a few more minutes of precious life." She coughed twice for effect. "We kiss and tears roll down his face as I breathe my last breath. Fade out."

We were spellbound.

"Wait! I want to be the one who dies," protested Debbie.

"Why you? It was my idea."

"It's my father's camera."

"That's right, so you should be shooting the scene."

"What about me? I want to die, too," said Claire brushing her curls away from her face in preparation for demonstrating her acting abilities.

"You can be the slave!" said Debbie.

Claire jumped up so quickly she was standing in front of us before anyone had time to second the proposal.

"I'm not going to be the slave!"

Still stinging from Debbie's comment about why I couldn't be Scarlett, I said, "But it's just for the movie."

"No! I'm not going to be a slave. I'm not even black."

"But you look black and, besides, you'd just be acting," Debbie rationalized.

"Yeah, be proud of who you are," I said.

"I am proud. I'm Cuban. Why are you guys making me something I'm not? I don't talk like black Americans. I speak Spanish with my grandma. My mom cooks Cuban food. My parents listen to mambo music at home. Look at my hair. This isn't black people's hair. It's Cuban hair." She held her long black curls up for us to see.

We back peddled like crazy.

"It's just acting like Letty said."

"Yeah, I can pretend to be a southern belle even though I'm Mexican."

When Claire looked like she was on the verge of tears, we dropped the whole thing and stared out at the trees uncomfortably aware of the silence.

I could tell that Lynn and Debbie were confused by her reaction. And, although I was complicit, I understood. At least I thought I did. I could remember the sting of bigotry more often than was fair in my short life. When I was five, my mother dressed my brother, Eddie, and me up for Halloween as a pilgrim and an Indian. I was the Indian. I felt so cute with my long black braids with a feather in my hair.

At twilight, my mother took us out to canvass our neighborhood for the annual ritual. She pushed Manny in a stroller, her profile revealing that Diego was well on the way. I remember Eddie and me walking up to a house while my mother waited on the sidewalk. It was a modest white house with green shutters and a screen door. An elderly couple responded to our ringing of the doorbell with the eagerly anticipated bowl of candy. "Trick or treat," Eddie and I shouted enthusiastically holding our paper bags open for the treat.

Instead of the usual, "Oh, my! What a cute little pilgrim and Indian," we heard from the other neighbors, the lady at this house gave me an angry look. "I'll give candy to the little boy, but you," she said glaring at me, "get off my porch. We don't want your kind here."

I stared at her for a second—a lump came to my throat. I had to wait for the penumbra of hurt to dissipate before running over to my mother and throwing my arms around her legs.

"¿Qué pasó?" she asked, cradling the top of my head against her leg.

Eddie told her what the lady said. My mother looked toward the door of the house, which had since closed. She said nothing to me, instead she continued on the sidewalk toward the next house stopping only to wait for us to go ring the doorbell. That was my lesson—ignore your pain and just keep going.

I wondered if Claire had such memories. I wanted to tell her that she was one of us, and that we were just trying to accept her the way she was. We were the generation that would end racial prejudice in this country. The words and efforts of Dr. King didn't land on deaf ears. We were going to make it happen. Youthful optimism—a never

ending gift to humanity.

Mr. Chappel was growing on us.

"Have you guys noticed that even the floor tiles in his room are green?" Lynn said one day.

"No, but they probably did that to match the green chalkboard," I offered.

"And he's always wearing that green shirt and tie."

"Teachers don't get paid very much. Maybe that's all he can afford."

"Maybe he just likes green."

"Maybe he's part frog."

We all laughed. "The amphibious teacher from the black lagoon!"

"Mr. Frog. No, Mr. Frogman."

"Or just Froggie. Yeah, let's call him Froggie from now on."

"Yeah, Froggie and Destructo. What a pair!" So our caricatures of Destructo in our notebooks took on a new friend.

Froggie was easily manipulated—a quality we much admired. We could get him off track and thus kill fifteen minutes by asking completely random questions. He was a wealth of information and took pride in going into great detail to explain the silliest of our inquiries.

We were about to read "The Tell-Tale Heart" by Edgar Allan Poe. Froggie was preparing us for the reading by telling us all about Poe and what made him want to write horror stories.

"Edgar Allan Poe had a very tragic life. His parents died when he was just a little boy. He married his thirteen-year-old cousin who died from consumption when she was only twenty-five years old."

"That's gross!" was the immediate reaction from the entire class.

"What was she consumed by?" asked Douglas.

"Isn't it illegal to marry your cousin?"

Froggie must have really loved his job. "Consumption is the archaic term for tuberculosis and, no, in fact marrying your cousin was rather common in Europe and Asia. But let's remember Edgar Allan Poe lived in the 1830s, and life was very different then," he said enthusiastically.

"Wasn't it illegal to marry a thirteen-year-old even in the 1800s?" Most of us were thirteen and still uncomfortable with our emerging adult bodies.

"In 1835, people didn't live as long, so they had different rules and ways of doing things. The rules change as time goes on. For example, you used to have to be twenty-one to vote, but as of this past summer, you now only have to be eighteen."

"How do the rules get changed?" Lynn asked.

"Do you mean how was the twenty-sixth amendment passed?"

"Well, yeah, but not just laws. How do you change the way people think about stuff?"

"What do you mean exactly?" Why were teachers always making us explain what we didn't understand?

Finally, Suzette Palmer said, "Why can't girls be altar boys? Why can't women be priests? Girls have to wear skirts to school even when it's cold. My mom got fired from her job when she was pregnant with my little sister. Women are trying to change the rules, but no one is listening."

"That's not true," Froggie countered, "The proposed Equal Rights Amendment is being debated in the Senate as we speak."

"My dad said that if that passes, women will get drafted," a girl interjected.

"When my cousin got his draft notice he went on a really strict diet and lost so much weight the army won't take him now," Jeff Hanover said.

"My mom is always on a diet, and she never loses any weight." The sudden din of thirty kids talking all at once about various relatives and their failed diets took up the next several minutes. Poor Froggie. He seemed at a loss as to what to do.

Suzette spoke up and refocused the class's attention by loudly declaring, "Everyone keeps telling the government that the war needs to end, but they are making it worse. No one is listening to us. Instead the National Guard shot college students at Kent State just for trying to tell the government

what they think. It's like what Sister Frances Joseph told us about the Bolsheviks in Russia." She was on a roll. I sure wished that I had paid attention in history class the day we learned about the Bolsheviks.

Froggie was relieved to take back control of the class, "Well, it's not as easy as that, and that's not exactly what I meant." We waited for him to explain what he did mean. "What I'm talking about are social norms, not political policies. Let's get back to Poe and 'The Tell-Tale Heart.' Lynn, why don't you begin reading?"

We each took turns reading parts of the story. When we finished, we were dumbfounded. Was he kidding? The man in the story killed an old man, cut up his body, and buried him under the floor! If my mother ever found out I read a story like that she would be furious. She got mad when she caught my brothers and me watching horror movies on television. I wondered if our principal, Sister Mary Louise, knew Mr. Chappel was having us read stories about people getting chopped up.

"Well, what did you think?" he asked.

"This story is like something you'd see on the Twilight Zone."

"I don't know how I'm going to sleep tonight."

"Murder's a sin."

"That man was stupid. If he had kept his mouth shut, he would have gotten away with it."

"That's not the point!" Froggie said, arms thrown up in exasperation with all the comments. We waited for the point. "The story is a masterpiece in human psychology. You can believe something so much that you convince yourself that it's real."

"But the man was insane!" the class responded en masse.

"Exactly!" A small victory it seemed to Froggie, but we weren't buying it.

"Hey, Mr. Chappel," one of the rowdy boys in the back of the room shouted out, "maybe if you try really hard, one day you'll be a whole church." The class erupted in laughter. Luckily for Mr. Chappel, the bell rang, and we filed out the door to our science class.



In the past few weeks we each took turns being the first to climb the trellis to the cone roof. Over time, we had gotten over our anxiety and could reach the top much more quickly. The four of us would sit on the cone roof after school and look across the courtyard to the open screen door in the balcony. The courtyard was full of weeds and overgrown bushes. The remains of a garden bench lay rusting beside a stone pathway. It must have grown roots, for it had sprouted a flowering vine. One of the windows in a door was cracked, but all else seemed secure.

We had a good idea of the layout of the house from that vantage point. The kitchen was to our left. Behind it was a service porch or a pantry that led to the sunroom (a solarium we learned it was called). We called the room on the first floor to our right the parlor. There was a fireplace that we could barely see through the set of double doors that opened to the courtyard. On the first floor directly in front of us was the entry hall. We could see a massive staircase to the left of the front doors. The wood was dark and it looked like there was a landing, but we were too far away to be sure.

"The rooms on the second floor must be bedrooms," Debbie surmised.

"Afton's room was the one with the balcony in the front of the house," I decided.

"I bet the turret room was the nursery. That's where each of the baby boys slept until he was old enough to move to one of the other rooms down the hall," Claire added.

It was fun to make up details about a life we knew little about. We could see wallpaper through the windows. Afton had a preference for flowers over stripes, the colors long since faded. There weren't any curtains on the windows and the rooms were all empty. The third floor, which only ran along the front of the house, consisted of servants' quarters. Debbie told us this with an air of confidence we didn't question.

Lynn had been studying the situation. "We can get to the balcony by climbing across the top of that trellis," she said.

"That's not a trellis. When it's held up by posts to make the vines grow horizontal, it's called a pergola. My grandparents have one at their house in New Haven," Debbie informed us.

"Whatever it's called, it's at least twenty-five feet across. It took us forever to climb ten feet up the trellis the first time."

"Plus, I bet the wood is as old as the house. If we fell through the pergola, we'd be trapped in the courtyard."

We spent many afternoons contemplating the chances of making it across, and if we did, what then? Would we actually have the nerve to enter the house? What if there was someone or something inside? Could we get out by opening one of the doors to the outside or would we have to crawl back over the pergola?

One afternoon we stayed later than we should have, evaluating our chances of getting into the house. We laid back on the roof of the sunroom, knees bent with the soles of our shoes firmly planted to keep us from rolling off.

Resting my head on my interlaced fingers, I stared at the clouds in the brilliant blue sky. A ray of sunlight warmed me, and for an instant, I thought there actually might be a God in his Heaven.

"What do you guys think?" I asked.

"We should go for it," Lynn said with growing determination.

"We'll have to do it on a weekend when we have more time," Debbie suggested.

"Maybe we should come prepared with rope or something in case one of us falls in."

"Who has a rope?"

We quietly stared at each other.

"Let's just do it. We won't fall." I said with adolescent optimism. It was decided. We would come back on Saturday and attempt what we had been putting off for two months.

That night, I went to bed filled with anticipation. Would we get in? What would we find? When I finally fell asleep, I dreamed about Afton's house. I was inside and alone. It was night, but the moon lit up every room so that I could clearly see what they contained. In my dream, antique furniture crowded every space. Bronze statues, hat racks, urns, and curio cabinets created a labyrinth within each room. There was an inordinate amount of glass. Little colored bottles of perfume, Tiffany lamps, mirrors, vacant candy dishes, vases with wilted flowers, dishes in pink and blue and amber glass with matching cups and saucers were stacked on buffets, armoires, dressing tables, and an old piano. Lace curtains hung in the open windows and a cool night breeze made them billow slightly. Faded tapestries hung on the walls next to paintings of landscapes by the masters. Hand embroidered doilies lay about on overstuffed chairs and loveseats with upholsteries worn and frayed. Mahogany floors were covered in Persian rugs and runners.

I was somehow moving from room to room. Floating, gliding. The floors did not creak and the hinges on the doors did not whine. There was complete silence. I reached the stairs and ascended to inventory the second floor. Again, the house was full of curios from across time and culture. An old radio console occupied the corner next to the Victrola. A harp was partially hidden behind a Chinese screen. A child's rocking horse, a woman's dress still pinned to its dress form, steamer trunks, a soldier's footlocker, and a suit of armor all cluttered the main hall.

Moonlight shone through stained glass windows on the landing as I made my way to the third floor. In the servant quarters I expected to see the same clutter, but the rooms were empty. Filled with anxiety, I drifted down the hallway, peering in every room, and each was the same. Someone had come and taken all the treasures. My sanctuary had been violated. I awoke with a feeling that the danger was still there, still waiting.

GETTING

IN

On that first Saturday of November, we were to meet at the drug store on Poplar Springs Avenue, but Claire's bus was late. Lynn, Debbie, and I bought ice cream cones to eat as we waited. It was not yet noon and the day was blustery, but chocolate mint chip ice cream knew no bounds. A breeze made wisps of hair fly about our heads until we all had ice cream in our hair as well as on our faces. When Claire stepped off the bus, we headed toward Alton's house. When we got to the wall, the lady that lived in the neighboring house was outside working in her yard.

"We can't climb the wall now. She'll see us and tell my mom," Lynn said.

We loitered at the corner wondering what to do.

"She won't notice. Let's go for it." I said, growing impatient.

"Let's just wait until she goes inside."

We obviously couldn't just stand there and stare at her, so we strolled twice around the block. Little gusts of wind kept blowing her leaf piles away, so she finally gave up, picked up her gardening tools, and moved to her backyard. Wasting no time, we ran over to the wall and climbed with record speed. Within seconds we were in the familiar seclusion of our beloved garden. The deciduous trees and bushes had just about lost all their foliage, and the air was filled with the smell of molding leaves. A gothic writer would have described it as melancholy and foreboding, but to us it was a paradise, our Shangri-la.

We walked directly to the trellis knowing why we were there. This time we were going to get in. Nothing would stop us. Up the trellis we went, no longer having to think, our movements automatic like a professional dancer on stage. Once on the roof we crab crawled over to make room for each other.

The four of us sat there in our usual spots. Lynn was on the far end. Her long blonde hair was parted in the middle, and she was wearing the headband she stole from one of her sisters. Her face was turned toward the sun that she said fed her karma. Claire was next to her, exotic and ebony, suppressing the emotional fissure that formed the day we suggested she be the slave for our movie.

Debbie, still unaccustomed to such deviant behavior, was giddy in her nervousness. I was the last one up. If my mother knew where I was, she would have killed me. Climbing on old, abandoned houses and preparing to break and enter was definitely not ladylike, and for that reason, I had to be there.

We sat on the roof and contemplated our imminent attempt at crossing the pergola. Like young swimmers on the high dive for the first time, we mustered up our courage and committed ourselves—no turning back now. Again, Lynn would go first. With her strength and agility, there was only the slightest hesitation as she crab-crawled over to the edge of the roof closest to the pergola. She reached her right leg out and touched the closest slat with the toe of her shoe. Inching her way closer, she put more of her weight on her right foot until her body was equally balanced between the roof and the pergola. Slowly bending down, she grabbed the vines with both hands and brought her left foot over to meet her right. We all held our breath as she shifted her full weight. The pergola stood firm and unmoving. The snapping of rotted wood and the breaking of branches that we envisioned did not materialize. Nothing at all happened. It would hold. With new confidence, she began her journey across to the balcony.

The next ten minutes were agonizing. Every step brought us closer to what we'd been waiting for these last two months. Lynn evaluated every move before letting go of her grasp on the vines that kept her balanced. The rest of us could offer no assistance. The leaves of the vine blocked our view of the woodwork. Lynn moved slowly, but with determination and with hope in tow.

"Don't look down."

"Keep moving."

"You're almost there."

With each encouraging remark, we moved with her. She readjusted a foot, then moved a hand, stepped over a vine, then repositioned the other

hand, over and over until she finally made it across and was within reach of the balcony. Slowly she raised her right arm and firmly grabbed a hold of the banister. She let go of the vines and stood up. With a swift hop she was over and standing in front of the open screen door. We held our breath as we watched her try the knob of the balcony door.

"Is it open?" each of us shouted at once. Lynn stepped back and looked over at us. She didn't have to say it, we knew it was locked.

That wasn't even considered as an option. It wasn't in the plan. What a cruel hoax the house played on us. Leaving a screen door open as a lure for adolescent girls who longed for a secret adventure.

"Oh man!"

"Craaap!"

"Try the windows."

Lynn made her way across the balcony, pulling and pushing at every window in futile effort. At the last window she peered inside.

"What do you see?" We waited. "What are you looking at?"

"Nothing, just the top of the staircase. There's a bench built into the wall."

"What's it look like?" Our impatience waxed. "Lynn?"

"There's a newspaper clipping on the window sill."

"What?"

"There's an article cut out of a newspaper sitting on the window sill."

"What's it say?"

She read it for our benefit.

Several sheep were missing from a neighboring farm... no evidence of wolves... Tobias Stillwagon estimates the cost...

"That's all I can read from here. I'm coming back." As we waited for Lynn to make her way back, we discussed the newspaper clipping and what relevance it might have to the house.

"No one has sheep in this town," I said.

"Dingbat! It's probably from a newspaper written in the 1800s or something."

"Maybe that's not the important part. Maybe it's the other side that someone wanted to keep."

"Maybe, but why would it be left on the window sill?"

"Maybe it just fell out of someone's pocket."

We waited for Lynn to rejoin us and continued the discussion.

"If the paper said that there was no evidence of wolves, that means the sheep were stolen."

"Or wandered away," added Debbie.

"But that's why there are shepherds, so the sheep don't get stolen or wander off," I said.

"That's only in the Bible and fairy tales," Lynn laughed. "There aren't any real shepherds."

"Maybe they were stolen for animal sacrifices like in the story of Abraham and the prodigal son!"

"That was a fatted calf, dummy. And they were going to eat it for dinner."

"But what if they were stolen for animal sacrifices?"

"Maybe the house was used for witchcraft," Debbie whispered.

The cool air suddenly took on a sinister chill. Every window's eye peered at us on our precarious perch. The caw of a raven ignited our muscles like the firing of a starter pistol. *Get down, get down, get down* was pumping through my veins as we all scrambled to the trellis and descended two at a time. Hitting the ground, Debbie and Claire ran toward the wall while Lynn and I headed toward the sycamore trees.

"What the heck?" I said to Lynn when we stopped.

Panting, she looked at me, "Why did you run?"

"What are you talking about? Why did you run?"

"I was just following you."

Reunited with Debbie and Claire on the veranda, we were back where we started. Worse, we were scared.

"This is just silly. There's no such thing as witches," I said as we all started talking at the same time.

"How do you know? The Devil is real. Devil worshipers might have stolen the sheep for satanic rituals."

"That doesn't mean the sacrifices were held in the house."

"Then why would someone have cut out that newspaper article?"

"We're all over-reacting. Are we going to try to get in the house or not?"

"But the door's locked. How are we supposed to get in?"

"There're the doors and windows in the courtyard. We can climb down the pergola instead of across it. That would be easier anyway." I held up my hands in a gesture of silence. "Are we going to do it or not?"

We all looked at each other.

"We're doing it. Let's go," Lynn was determined.

Back we went to the trellis. Once on the roof we surveyed the courtyard. There were three doors that we could see, two sets of French doors and a door to the kitchen. We could see eight windows.

"I think the easiest way is to climb down those posts holding up the pergola. They're all viny, so it should be easy," I said.

"Okay, me first," Lynn announced. She crawled over to the edge of the roof and reached across to the pergola. The first post was just beneath her. She climbed down the vine as if she'd done it a hundred times. Once on the ground, she looked up at the rest of us, arms akimbo, and with an impatient look on her face.

"I'm next," I said and started down with determination. Claire followed me equally committed. The three of us then looked up at Debbie.

"I'll wait here."

"No you won't! Get down here."

With hesitation, Debbie crawled over to the pergola.

"I'm scared," she said.

"We all did it. You can, too. Just don't look down. It's not that far," I said.

What Debbie had in brains, she lacked in courage and strength. Every move she made was agonizing for her. Clutching the vine, she slowly started her descent. Our focus on her would have led an observer to admire our concern for her safely, but in my heart I knew I was just afraid to look around. But once Debbie touched ground, I had no choice. There we were, in the courtyard. We slowly turned to take in our surroundings. The ground was bare in the areas where grass once grew. Weeds grew tall through the cracks in the walkway and against the house. To our left were the windows to the sunroom.

We walked over to look inside. The painting on the ceiling could now be seen in its entirety. With more light coming through the windows, we could see it in far more detail. It was much more colorful and ornate than we originally thought.

"My father says that the pagans believed the sun represents truth, life, and the soul," Lynn informed us.

I contemplated this for a second, "Courage? What about courage?"

"Come on, let's try to get in." Claire was more interested in the here and now.

The kitchen was on our right. There was another alcove that we couldn't see from the outside windows. It must have been a storage room. We tried the door. It was locked.

As if one body, we walked across the courtyard to the French doors leading to the front entry hall. Locked. We made our way across to the parlor. The weeds and overgrown bushes scratched our legs. Burrs attached themselves to our socks. Claire reached for the knob. A slight twist and it came off in her hand.

"You broke it!"

"No I didn't. It must have already been broken. Look, it's rusted through."

"Try the other one."

Lynn turned the remaining knob. With the creaking of rusting hinges, the door opened. We froze. We could feel the stale air flow out from inside the house. My first impulse was to run, but where?

I took a breath. "Go in," I whispered.

"No, you go in."

"You first."

"You guys! This is what we've been waiting for," Lynn was growing impatient.

"Let's go in together."

"Okay, you first."

Eventually we all stepped inside. A musty smell made me wrinkle my nose, but all was quiet. Time paused. We were finally inside our house. Except for the sun that spotlighted dancing particles of dust, the outside world ceased to exist. Afraid to disturb the quiet, we continued to whisper.

"Let's go this way."

"It's dark over there."

"But this is the only way to the kitchen."

"Why do you want to go to the kitchen?"

"Don't you want to go into the sunroom?"

We slowly moved into the entry hall. The staircase was more massive up close. We couldn't see past the first landing since the staircase made a Uturn. The balusters were almost as tall as we were. The raised panels on the

wainscot were the same as the inside of the front doors. The dark wooden floor showed our footprints through its layer of dust. The French doors to the courtyard provided the only light unfiltered with dust and foliage. We bypassed the staircase and continued toward a hallway that led to the dining room. There was more light from windows on two sides, so this room seemed more cheerful.

"Do you think there was a chandelier hanging where that hole is in the ceiling?"

"Oh yeah, it was probably made of crystal, and I bet they had one of those really long tables. Afton sat on one end and Cedric sat on the other so they had to shout to each other to be heard during dinner."

"And they probably had a little bell to ring for the servants." Debbie took on the role of Afton. She stood up perfectly straight and motioned the ringing of a bell. "Adelaide, you may serve the dessert."

"A lovely dinner, my amazingly beautiful wife," I responded as Cedric. "I will now retire to my den for my cigar and brandy."

"Yes, of course my incredibly handsome husband, and I will see to the children."

Claire and Lynn just rolled their eyes.

"The kitchen's through there." Lynn pointed to another dimly lit hallway. We walked through the butler's pantry. It was not like any kitchen we were accustomed to. There were no appliances or cabinets. A hole in the floor must have once been where the sink stood.

"It's kinda small. There's no place to sit."

"That's what the dining room is for."

"We only eat in the dining room at my house when we have company or on Thanksgiving."

"But they were rich. They had servants and stuff. The family probably never came in here. Probably only the cook, the butler, and the scullery maid ever came into the kitchen."

"The scullery maid! Get serious."

"Here's the basement." Lynn stopped just short of the doorway to the basement.

"Don't go down there," I said in a near panic.

"I wasn't going to."

"Close the door."

"No. Don't touch it," Debbie warned.

"Why not?"

"It's just creepy."

Lynn mischievously gave Debbie a gentle push toward the basement door.

"Don't do that!" Debbie raised her voice in fright as she reached across for my arm.

We continued through the kitchen to the back foyer. From there, a short hallway led us to the sunroom. I felt a sense of reverence as I entered. Lifting my eyes, I beheld the painting on the ceiling as if it were the Sistine Chapel. Speechless, I moved in circles witness to the dawn of creation.

"Jesus!" Debbie said. She had her arms raised in a salute toward Heaven. It was then that I noticed the floor. Little pieces of wood in different colors and shapes fit like puzzle pieces creating a starburst design. I was floating in outer space, between galaxies, and in search of the angels. Through the sixteen long narrow windows, I could see Earth. A panoramic view of the backyard was to my right. I could see the trellis with the vine we climbed to get to the cone roof.

The courtyard was to my left beyond the French doors.

"I can't believe we're here," I whispered. I felt as if I had stepped into a storybook.

"How long do you think it's been since anyone has been in here?" asked Claire.

"I bet the house has been empty since Afton died."

"Let's have a séance and contact her ghost."

"Are you insane? It's creepy enough without you talking about ghosts!" Debbie said.

"BOOM-boom, BOOM-boom, BOOM-boom. Oh, my God! It's the tell-tale heart!" Lynn threw her hands up to cover her ears in mock horror.

"Stop!" Debbie slapped her in the arm. "That's not funny."

"Oh, quit being such a baby."

"Lynn, you're being cruel," I said. "Cut it out."

"I need to go outside. All this dust is making me wheeze." Debbie put the palm of her hand over her heart as if it helped her breathe easier.

"That's not where your lungs are. Quit pretending."

"Yeah, let's go outside for a while anyway," Claire urged. "It is really stuffy in here."

Ahead of us, on the other side of the sunroom, we saw another door. "What's in there do you think?" I asked.

"Probably a closet or something." Lynn walked toward the door and reached to open it.

"NO!" we shouted all together.

"If we don't open it, we'll never know what's inside."

"Maybe we don't want to know."

"Open it." Debbie surprised us all. Lynn slowly reached for the knob. She turned it slowly to the right until we heard a click. Pulling gently, the door resisted. She grabbed the knob with both hands and gave it a hard yank. It flew open, and we all screamed. We were struck in the face by sunlight from the windows of the parlor. Relieved and feeling a little silly, we walked through. We were back where we started. The door that allowed our entry still stood partially open. Fresh air lured us quickly back outside. Back out in the courtyard, Claire and Debbie sat on what was left of the bench while Lynn and I tried the other doors and windows.

"Wait a minute. Let's go back inside and see if we can unlock the kitchen door so we don't have to climb the trellis to get back in again." Lynn was always thinking ahead.

"I'll wait here with Debbie until her wheezing stops," Claire volunteered.

"I'll go with you," I told Lynn, and we went back to the kitchen and tried the door that led to the outside. It required a key, so it couldn't be opened from the inside.

"Let's try the front door." Again, it required a key.

"What about unlocking a window?"

"The windows that face the veranda would be the easiest ones to get in from."

We walked through the dining room and the parlor trying each window, but as hard as we strained, pulling and pushing, not one would budge.

"Crud! No wonder. Look. They are all nailed shut."

"Okay, forget that idea."

"Let's go back outside."

Debbie's asthma wasn't getting any better.

"We better go," Claire suggested.

"Okay, but let's leave the parlor door open so the house can air out for when we come back."

"Good idea," Lynn and I opened both sides of the French doors to the parlor and propped them in place with a couple of bricks.

Getting out was more of a problem than getting in. Climbing up the vine was much more difficult than climbing down. It was wrapped around a support post, not a trellis, so there were no cross slats for footings. We had to pull ourselves up with our arms while balancing with our toes on the vine. One by one we crawled back onto the cone roof. I thought Debbie was going to faint, but after a few minutes she regained her color. Her breath returned as her fear subsided.

"At least we know how to get in now," Lynn said wiping her hands on her shorts. "There still has to be an easier way. Next time let's bring a hammer and a screwdriver to take out some of the nails holding the windows shut."

"When are we coming back?" I said with excitement at having succeeded in penetrating the house.

"How about next weekend?"

"Oh, crap! We forgot to get the newspaper clipping," Lynn said, smacking her forehead with the palm of her hand.

"No! Shoot!"

"Let's go back and get it now."

"No. I can't. It's already three-fifteen. I need to be home before four, or I'll be in trouble," I said.

Reluctantly we climbed down from the roof. Covered in dirt, sweat, and random plant parts, we pranced around the house one more time. The energy from the excitement of our success was hard to quell. I felt like Christopher Columbus setting foot in the New World or Neil Armstrong walking on the moon. We could now stake our claim. Looking through the windows was now with intimate knowledge of the inside, at least of the first floor. This was our house, and we would be back.

WANDA

That Monday I was bursting to tell everyone at school what I had done. I wanted to boast of my physical strength and agility in climbing the trellis, to brag about my success in overcoming my fears and entering the house, and to claim rights to my property. But I knew that I had to keep the secret. All of us did. I found myself doodling sketches of the house in my notebook instead of focusing on the morning's catechism lesson. Occasionally, I would look over at Claire, Debbie, or Lynn and we would exchange knowing glances. We had crossed a bridge, entered a dimension that united our souls with each other and the ghost of Afton Fellows.

History class took on new meaning. Our books were opened to World War I. This was the war that took the lives of Afton's sons, Eben and Wade. *I know soldiers who died in the First World War*, I wanted to say, but bit my tongue. I didn't really know them. How could I? Yet, in my heart, I knew them well. I had been in their house, looked out their windows, and climbed their trees.

"Over one hundred thousand American soldiers died in World War I," said Sister Frances Joseph. "It was called 'the war to end all wars."

Blythe raised her hand. "Didn't World War I come before World War II?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then it didn't end all wars."

"World War I was the most devastating war the world had ever known, and because of that, no one could ever believe another war like it could ever happen again. It was incomprehensible that something like World War II was possible." Sister didn't like to be contradicted, but she was patient with our questions nonetheless.

"Then World War II should be called the war to end all wars," said Jeff without being called on.

"What about Korea?" someone asked. "That came after World War II."

"What about Vietnam?" from the other side of the room.

The class started in on one of its quests to prove the teacher wrong, a waste of time with Sister Frances Joseph. She was never wrong. I just wanted to know more about how Eben and Wade Fellows died. Were they together or did they die alone? Were they gassed, or did they get shot? Did Afton stand bravely silent as their coffins were delivered to her each draped in an American flag, or are their bodies still unidentified in a common grave in the French countryside?

These thoughts still occupied my mind as I walked home from school. I made up stories in my head about how Eben held his girlfriend in his arms before boarding the train that would take him off to war.

"Promise you'll write," she pleaded.

"I'll write to you every day, my darling, and I'll think of you every night," Eben promised.

"And promise me you'll be careful. Say that you'll come back to me alive and all in one piece." She held the lapels of his uniform as she looked up into his pale blue eyes.

"Do not worry. I will be careful. Oh my love, remember that even though this body is going to war, my heart and soul will stay with you forever."

A tear would come to her eye as she tilted her head back for one last kiss.

"Hi, Letty." A voice brought me back to reality. Alana from across the street was standing on the corner waiting for the light to change. Unhurried, we walked the rest of the way home together taking in the beautifully clear day. For weeks I ached to tell her about Afton's house, and my recent entry made my oath of secrecy even more difficult to keep.

Alana and I became fast friends after she moved into my neighborhood. She was the first person I had ever met whose parents were divorced. She lived with her mother and brother in the front apartment of her building. We would call each other on the telephone and stand in our front windows looking at each other while we talked. Because of her parents' situation, my mother only reluctantly let me hang out with her. In my mother's opinion, no self-respecting woman was ever divorced. But, again American women had no shame. Alana's mom seemed like a normal mom to me, except for the fact that she had a job. My mom didn't like the job part one bit either. Who watched the kids after school? What a shock it would have been to my mother to know that my little brother's teacher, Mrs. Merry, also had kids.

I thought Alana went to the public school because her mom, being divorced and having loose morals, didn't know any better. But Alana said the reason she and her brother didn't go to Saint Benedict's was because they were Christian.

"You can go to Catholic school if you're Christian. It's the same thing," I said.

"No, Christians aren't Catholics."

"What difference does it make? We both believe in God."

"You guys worship statues."

"No, we don't!" I was appalled. "That's against the second commandment."

"Don't you have statues in your church? Don't you take them flowers and kneel in front of them and pray?"

"Well, yeah, but..." I started getting frustrated but then realized she was right. One of my favorite rituals was the May Procession where we would carry the statue of the Virgin Mary on a litter covered with roses into the church as the entire school sang, "Ave Maria." We were taught to genuflect before the altar, and my grandma always kissed the crucifix on her rosary when she finished her daily prayers. This revelation started me thinking about worshipping statues which led to me thinking about the Stations of the Cross and then holy water. It was just too much to worry about.

But it didn't matter that Alana wasn't Catholic. I liked her anyway. She was the only girl my age that lived on the street, and besides, her building was the only one with a pool that allowed kids. The other apartment buildings on the street were for adults only. They had really cool pools with diving boards, but no kids to invite us over. After a summer morning of playing "Kill the Man" in the carports or filling up water balloons in the laundry room sink and chasing kids through the alley, it was always refreshing to jump into the pool. But the reprieve from the summer heat always turned out to be short lived. One of the old crotchety tenants usually complained about the noise and called the landlord. Within minutes Mrs. Laramie came over and kicked us out.

"I'll be having a word with your parents if I get any more complaints. I don't want every kid in the neighbor-hood using this pool, especially those dirty Mexican kids from across the street. This pool is for tenants only." That was the end of it for a week or two, and then we would sneak in again.

"Want to come over and hang out at my house for a while?" Alana asked as we rounded the corner to Robin Drive.

"Okay, just let me go home and change out of my uniform first."

As we approached our apartment buildings, I could see the Kirtland boys and my brothers, with the camouflage helmets they got last Christmas, playing army up the street.

"You'd think they'd declare world peace already," I said.

"Then what would they do?"

"Remember when they were playing swords with that goofy kid who lives on the next street over, and he got whacked in the nose?"

"That was so gross! There was blood all over his shirt and on the sidewalk."

"My dad made Manny go over and apologize the next day."

"What ever happened to that kid?"

"He still lives there, but I guess he's not allowed to play here anymore."

A red Mustang roared by us with its radio blaring. It was going too fast for the curve at the bottom of the hill, but the high school kids who lived up the street were always driving too fast. I started to say something to Alana when the screech of tires re-focused my attention just in time to see Kyle Kirtland running up the middle of the street toward the car.

"What an idiot! One of these days he's going to get himself killed," I said as I realized that something was terribly wrong. The car was stopped and the man driving had gotten out. Kyle seemed to be in a panic as he got on his hands and knees and crawled under the stopped car. Alana and I both ran to the scene along with every other person within earshot. By the time we got there, all we could see were Kyle's legs sticking out behind the right rear tire. We could hear him crying, but we knew he couldn't have been hit. With a sudden burst of adrenaline, I ran in all directions at once looking for Manny and Diego.

"Manny! Manny! Di..." There they were, still standing on the lawn, helmets and all. Relief mixed with anger made me forget for a second that someone was under the car. By that time, Mrs. Kirtland and Lance were dragging Kyle out. In his arms was Piper. His fuzzy white fur was a tangle of blood, gravel, and black tire marks. Kyle was hysterical. The rest of us were stunned.

"Shit! It's just a fucking dog," a young bearded man, his eyes hiding behind dirty hair, proclaimed from behind us. He took a drag on a cigarette then flicked the butt on the street. "Let's get the hell out of here," he said as he and another man climbed back into the car and took off as quickly as they had arrived.

Mrs. Kirtland and Lance walked Kyle, inconsolable and still holding the lifeless Piper, into the house. The rest of us dispersed as respectfully as possible.

By then my mother was running up the street to meet us halfway. "¿Qué paso? Are you alright?" Nothing can describe the look in a mother's eyes when she thinks something tragic has happened to one of her young.

"Piper got hit by a car. . .and. . .and he's dead," rattled Diego faster than my mother could translate his English.

"¡Vámonos! All of you, get in the house," she ordered as if the danger was still imminent. "You shouldn't be playing in the street. What if it had been you? What would I have done? Do you want an ambulance to come and take you away?"

Alana knew enough to give my mother a wide berth when she started rattling off in Spanish. "See you later," she said as she waved to me and walked off toward her apartment building.

"See ya," I said as I caught up with my family. My mother was still freaking out. Calm down, I thought to myself, but I knew that once she started on one of her worry-filled rants, we just had to wait it out.

I felt really bad for Kyle and Callie. I didn't know what it felt like to lose a pet, being that I'd never had one. I also thought about the man who drove the car that killed Piper. How could someone be so reckless and uncaring? Wasn't he once a kid? Didn't he ever have a pet? I wondered whether people started out cold hearted and angry or did they become that way as they grew up? I prayed that I wouldn't grow up to be like that.

I told Debbie, Claire, and Lynn about Piper at school the next day.

"That's so sad!"

"I can't believe the man just drove off like that after he ran Piper over and killed him," Debbie said.

"He could have at least said he was sorry."

"Did anyone call the police?" Lynn asked.

"Yeah, but they can't do anything because no one got a license plate number."

"What are they going to do with the body?" Claire asked. "Are they going to bury him in their backyard?"

"We bury all our pets in our backyard. There're three hamsters, two guinea pigs, a rabbit, and Ju-Ju, our dog." Lynn had as many pets as she had brothers and sisters.

"I don't know? I didn't ask." That wasn't something you ask a kid as he's pulling his dead dog out from under a car.

"We should bury him in the garden of Afton's house. Then we could put flowers on the grave when we go and visit the house." That's why Claire was so interested in the body. She wanted to turn Afton's garden into a cemetery.

"Yeah, we could put up a little cross and make a little circle of rocks around the grave." It appeared that Debbie had the same idea.

"Who's Afton?" a voice from behind us asked. It was Wanda Hinkle. She was one of those people who had to know everything before anyone else. Consequently, she was always eavesdropping and sticking her nose into other people's business. We were not fond of her, so we were annoyed by her intrusion into our circle, and we didn't want to encourage her by giving up too many details.

"She's a friend of ours," Lynn said without looking up.

"Why would she let you bury someone else's dog in her garden? And why do you visit her house? Shouldn't you be visiting her if she's your friend?" Nothing got by Wanda.

"It's really none of your business." We got up and moved to both get away from her and to get in line for school. Wanda overhearing us talking about Afton's house was a close call. We would have to be more careful and not talk about the house at school.

The secret was starting to have an effect on me. I didn't want to tell my family. Having a life apart from them was liberating. It made me feel like I was my own person, but not being able to tell my other friends was gnawing at me like a puppy with an old shoe. I found myself stopping in mid-sentence when I was hanging out with Alana or when I went to my cousins' house for Thanksgiving.

My devotion to Afton kept me quiet, but it was different with Wanda. Her questions about our house vexed me. I wanted to tell her, "Yes, we have a house. It's ours and you can never go there." But all I could do was remain silent, and it wasn't getting any easier.

When I first enrolled at Saint Benedict's in the third grade I was assigned to sit next to Wanda. Unfortunate in that we were always instructed to do

everything in pairs.

"The first two girls in row four, you may go to the library now. The first two girls in row two, you may use the lavatory." Wanda and I were the last two girls in row six. She was a cute little blonde with an upturned nose, but there was absolutely nothing else about her that was endearing. She had to be the focus of attention every minute of the day and whatever anyone said, she was sure to contradict.

When it was time to clean out the fishbowl, Sister instructed Wanda and me to do it. The process involved taking the fishbowl to the girls' lavatory, scooping the goldfish out of the water with a net, and placing them in a smaller bowl until their permanent home could be emptied, cleaned, and refilled. Wanda washed out the bowl, while I cleaned the slime off the sunken ship and plastic seaweed. When it was time to return Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John to their home, I scooped them up in the net.

"Give me the bowl, Wanda, so I can put the fish back."

"No, you give me the fish, and I'll put them in the bowl."

"I can do it," I insisted, holding the net with the fish.

"I can do it, too. Give me the fish."

"No, give me the bowl."

We must have gone on like that for several minutes. I finally looked at the net with the four goldfish and realized they were no longer thrashing about.

"Uh oh!"

"You killed them!"

"You killed them. I told you to give me the bowl!" I dumped the fish back in the water, and we carried the fishbowl back to the classroom as if a job well done.

During the spelling test, Sister was in the middle of saying the words from our spelling list. "Their. The family drove away in 'their' car. Their." As she walked past the fishbowl, she hesitated. The writers of the four Gospels were floating on their backs. Wanda and I froze. Sister frowned, lightly tapping the bowl. She waited a second, and then continued with the spelling test.

If Wanda had only given me the bowl, the tragedy could have been averted. Instead, she had blood on her hands, and although five years had passed, I had not forgotten.

We headed back to the house after school. Paranoia was getting the best of us, so we decided that we needed to take precautions in case we were being followed. First we went to Lynn's house to dump our books and skirts. We sat on her front lawn until the street was quiet. We then wasted no time getting to the wall. Looking over our shoulders, we climbed up the wall at the same time from different locations. Once in the garden, we regrouped at the brick pathway.

"Anyone see you?" "No. You?" "We're clear."

We ran to the trellis and climbed to our spots on the cone roof. Once more, we checked to see if we had been seen.

"Let's go," Lynn commanded. Down we climbed and were in the house in less than a minute.

"The newspaper article!" All four of us ran to the staircase in the entry hall. Since we had not yet been on the second floor, we stopped at the foot of the stairs and looked up.

"Ready?" I asked. With a nod of their heads, Debbie, Lynn, Claire, and I looked up to see what awaited us. Holding each other's hand, we ascended the stairs. When we got to the landing, we stopped.

"Do you think anything is up there?" Debbie asked.

"No, but I'm sure it's empty like the rest of the house," Claire assured her.

"Remember in *The Birds* when Tippi Hedren goes into the attic and all the birds are waiting for her?"

"Lyyyynnnnn, stop it!" Debbie screeched.

"You're always doing that. It's not funny." I admonished Lynn, but I couldn't help laughing just a little bit. Debbie was so easy to scare.

"Look, you can see the sunlight coming in through the windows on the balcony. Let's go." On tiptoes, we reached the second floor and could see through the windows to the courtyard below. Lynn tried the door to the balcony. Of course, it needed a key like the other doors in the house.

"Let's get the newspaper," Claire said.

We ran to the window where the newspaper article was still sitting on the sill. It was yellowed and covered with a thick layer of dust. Tiny holes were probably the result of hungry little paper-eating bugs.

"Stop! Don't touch it. It's so old it might crumble."

"Oh yeah, the lady in the library was wearing those white gloves when she was working with all those old newspapers and stuff, remember?" We stood looking at the newspaper clipping and read it again. For a minute or two, we did not know what to do.

"Let's try turning it over gently," Claire suggested.

Lynn lifted one side with the tip of her finger. So far, so good. We held our breath as she gingerly flipped it over. Craning our necks, we read what was on the other side.

...son of Afton and the late Cedric Fellows. Lieutenant Wade Fellows was assigned to Company B, fourth Infantry, third Division of the U.S. Army. He was killed in action during the battle at Meuse-Argonne on October 16, 1918. He was buried at Bois de Benge, France. He is survived by his mother, two brothers, and his maternal grand-mother, Florence Case. He was twenty-six...

We were speechless. Of course, we already knew that two of Afton's sons died during the first World War, but this brought it home.

"Why is this here?" Debbie asked.

I was wondering the same thing. "It must have fallen out and was left behind as the place was being packed up."

"We should take it to the library and have them put it with the rest of the family's papers."

"What will we say when they ask us where we got it?"

"Good point."

"I'll take it and keep it safe until we figure out what to do with it," I offered. I felt it was my obligation to Afton to preserve this painful reminder that her son was dead. I placed the clipping as carefully as I could in the pocket of my blouse. It stuck out just a little, but I made a mental note to be careful. The four of us stood silently for a moment longer making a sign of the cross to show respect for his soul.

Lynn broke the silence. "Let's look around." Our attention was refocused back on the fact that we were on the second floor. We hadn't yet explored this part of the house.

The second floor was U-shaped because the sunroom on the north end was only a single story topped by the cone roof. We ran from room to room looking out each window. All we could see were the tops of trees from each

direction. Each room was the same. There were no closets and a ceiling lamp hung down with its wiring exposed as if it had been an afterthought.

"That's kinda tacky," I said.

"Electric lights probably hadn't yet been invented when the house was built. They had to add them later," stated Debbie.

There were seven bedrooms, if the turret room was counted as a bedroom, but there was only one bathroom.

"Even my house has two bathrooms, and it only has four bedrooms," said Claire.

"That's kinda weird that there's only one bathroom."

"People probably still used outhouses and chamber pots back then. Plus, I don't think they took a bath everyday like we do now."

"How do you know all this stuff?" Claire asked.

"It's in our history book."

"Then they must have been really smelly." Claire wrinkled up her nose.

I regretted not spending more time reading my history book.

"Are we going to the third floor?" Lynn wasn't done exploring.

"Yeah, let's go." I wasn't done exploring either. The staircase to the third floor was not nearly as grand as the main staircase. The steps would have been hidden behind a door, except that the door was missing. Only broken hinges remained. Although we could see daylight at the top of the stairs, the light was much dimmer than on the second floor. Anxiety returned at the thought of continuing to climb even higher into the house. We exchanged questioning glances, and despite our trepidation, we slowly climbed the stairs. This time creaking noises announced our presence like a town crier, "Hear ye, hear ye. Catholic school girls ascending."

At the top, there was one long narrow hallway. No windows looked out to the courtyard and the air was heavy with age. The only light that shone through came from the windows in the four rooms facing the front of the house. The rooms were small and the dormer windows protruded from the sloped ceiling. They were void of the fancy wallpaper from the second floor or the mahogany paneling from the grand rooms of the first floor.

"See, told you guys these were the servant quarters," Debbie reminded us.

"Oh, look." Claire was standing at the window. "At least they had a nice view of the sycamore trees."

"It's hot up here," I said.

"Yeah, and I'm starting to feel claustrophobic," Debbie complained.

Deciding there wasn't much to see up there, we descended the stairs, content to have been in every room of the house. We finally felt that it was completely ours. Every nook and cranny had been visited and explored at least once. But our favorite place was still the sunroom.

"Let's go hang out in the sunroom," Claire suggested even though it was getting late and I had to go soon. We passed through the kitchen to the sunroom and sat on the floor despite the dust. We were glad we left the parlor doors open the last time we were there. The house had aired out and didn't smell as musty. Debbie didn't complain about her asthma.

"I think that we should come here at least once a week from now on and next year when we're in high school."

"We can do our homework and catch up on what's going on in our lives," I said.

"I can't believe we won't be together next year."

"Let's make a pact that no matter what, we'll always keep in touch."

"Okay, let's shake."

"You have to spit in your palm first," Lynn directed.

"Eeew yuck! No way. That's gross! Just shake." We reached out and did a four way handshake.

CHRISTMAS

On the Friday before Christmas vacation, the entire school had to go to church for a special Christmas Mass first thing in the morning. I hated Mass. Eight years of Catholic school and I still didn't know when I was supposed to stand, sit, or kneel. The reading of the Gospel and the homily always put me to sleep. But I did like the church itself. The wooden pews, the high ceiling, the choir loft, and the holy water font were familiar features that made me feel at home. When the service grew tedious, my eyes always seemed to drift toward the stained glass windows. How prettily the sun shone through the colored glass. I also enjoyed the smell of incense and the singing of the hymns. The acoustics in the church, and the combined voices of everyone from six-year-olds singing off key to the quivering voices of elderly parishioners, always made the singing sound so celestial.

The altar was decorated with poinsettias and a manger scene. I thought about what my friend, Alana, said about how we worship statues. It's not the statues; it's what they represent. It was the same as pledging "allegiance to the flag and to the republic *for which it stands*." I had to remember to tell her that next time I saw her.

The first and second graders opened the Mass with a special performance. Fidgeting in their Santa hats, they stood in front of the altar and sang Christmas carols. They held fake carol books and sang in various approximations to the key. Diego was right up front. He had just lost his front tooth the night before, so he made it a point to smile wide.

Being in the second grade, he hadn't yet made his first communion. When it came to that part of the Mass, ninety-two fidgety little six and seven-year-olds had to just sit and watch four hundred older kids and dozens of adults walk up to the altar to receive the sacrament. If nothing else, being Catholic taught us to be patient.

"Body of Christ," the priest said over and over as he held the wafer out for each recipient. "Amen." The round white host always stuck to the roof of my mouth, and I spent the rest of the Mass trying to scrape the pasty patch off with my tongue.

After lunch my class had a gift exchange. We were to bring in a gift for either a boy or a girl that cost less than a dollar. I brought in a box of checkers and a checkerboard that I got at the drugstore. I didn't take the wrapping part into consideration. How does one wrap a checkerboard and a box of checkers so it doesn't look like a checkerboard and a box of checkers?

Destructo had come up with an elaborate system to distribute the gifts. A parent volunteer wrote a number on the gifts while we were at lunch. When we returned, we each drew a number out of a bag. Our number matched our gift. Since I wrapped the checkerboard and checkers separately, they each got their own number. By the time the exchange was done, Mitch had a checkerboard and Patty had a box of checkers. I got a box of breath mints.

"Remember boys and girls," Destructo said, "Christmas is about God sending his only son to save the world. It's not about receiving gifts. The gifts symbolize the offerings brought by the three kings to baby Jesus."

"How come the Jewish kids get eight gifts?" asked Douglas.

"They have their traditions, and we have ours," was her reply.

"I'd rather be Jewish," the kid next to me said under his breath.

Lynn was leaving right after school to go back East to spend Christmas vacation with her grandparents. She made us promise not to go to Afton's house without her.

"I'll be back the day after New Year's."

"We'll have to wait two whole weeks!"

"Please!"

"Okay, I promise," said Claire.

"Me, too," said Debbie.

"What about you, Letty?"

I didn't want to promise. Two weeks was a long time, and I knew I would be bored to death at home with nothing to look forward to.

"Okay," I finally said.

Christmas Eve was the one night my mother wouldn't let us watch television. Usually the television came on as soon as one of us kids got home from school and didn't get turned off until the last of us went to bed. But on Christmas Eve, the television was turned off as soon as it got dark.

The lights on our aluminum Christmas tree were plugged in, and my brothers and I counted and recounted our presents. We held them in one hand to feel the weight, and then shook them to narrow down the possible contents.

"This one is too heavy to be clothes," proclaimed Manny enthusiastically.

"This one has lots of pieces. See," said Diego as he shook the box for my ears. "Can you hear them rattling around in there?"

"This one doesn't weigh anything. I think it's just an empty box." Eddie tried to act cool, but I knew he was just as excited as the rest of us.

The four of us lay on the floor. Watching the lights of the color wheel rotating on the ceiling, we reminisced of Christmases past.

"Remember when Diego was a baby, and he used to eat the wrapping paper?"

"Yeah, and remember when Manny was three and we found him asleep under the tree on Christmas morning?"

"I wanted to see Santa Claus," Manny exclaimed in self-defense.

"Is Santa Claus real?" Diego asked. "A boy at school said there really isn't a Santa Claus. He said he was just make-believe."

"He's right. Mom and dad buy the presents and bring them in after we go to bed," Eddie answered.

I shot him a dirty look. "They do that for the presents already under the tree. Santa Claus brings the rest."

"How does he get in if we don't have a chimney?"

"Magic. He turns into smoke and comes in through the heating duct like a genie." I explained as Eddie snickered.

"What do you want Santa to bring you?" I asked Diego.

"A bike."

My mother came in and shooed us all off to bed. "Vamos a hacer mimi."

"I'm going to watch T.V." Eddie said.

"No. Todos vámonos."

"But, I'm sixteen!"

"Ha ha." I couldn't help but rub it in.

I went to bed and tossed and turned for an hour or so. When sleep finally came, I dreamed about Afton's house. Hundreds of candles illuminated the parlor, and a ten-foot Christmas tree stood regally in the corner filling the room with the scent of pine. Holly was strung across the mantel, and a

roaring fire blazed and crackled in the fireplace. Five stockings patiently waited to be filled after the children had gone to sleep. I could hear laughter coming from the dining room. Along with the sounds of merriment, the delicious smell of roasted turkey, cranberry sauce, and candied yams filled my senses.

The family was dressed in festive attire. Afton wore a red silk tulle gown with a décolleté neckline. Gold earrings matched her necklace and accented the sparkle in her eyes. Cedric was strikingly handsome in his black cutaway coat, heavily starched shirt, and white bow tie. I could see a gold watch chain hanging from his vest pocket. The older boys were dressed in their fancy knicker suits, while Harland, the youngest, still wore a velvet suit with a lace collar.

I turned around and the family was in the parlor. Afton sat at the piano, her fingers floating across the keys. Harland sat next to his mother, his eyes following her every stroke. Cedric sat in a chair by the fire smoking a pipe. The older boys stood next to their father, singing Christmas carols. *Good King Wenceslas looked out on the feast of Stephen, when the snow lay round about deep and crisp and even.* I could feel the warmth from the fire, as I stood mesmerized by the crackling flames.

"Wake up, Letty. It's Christmas."

I momentarily opened my eyes and then rolled over to go back to sleep. "It's night time. Go back to bed." I mumbled as Manny and Diego pulled the covers off of my perfectly comfortable repose.

"No. Get up!"

As soon as I sat up to snatch back my blanket, Manny and Diego's excitement stirred my blood. "Let's go," I said. We tiptoed into the living room.

By the dim light of the dawn, a bicycle could be seen standing next to the tree. "A bike! A bike! I got a bike." Diego got what he had wished for.

Eddie soon joined us.

"How did Santa Claus get that bike in through the heating duct?" he asked.

Luckily, Diego was already trying to ride around the dining room table and didn't pay him any attention.

By the time my parents got out of bed, the rest of us had used up all our self-restraint and had all our presents stacked in front of us. We each selected a box to open as the rest of the family watched. After opening

boxes containing some new jeans and tennis shoes, Manny's face lit up with delight at his new Hot Wheels and a model car with a battery powered motor. Eddie opened his boxes of jeans and sweatshirts and sat back, too cool to let anyone know he was enjoying the fun.

I opened a box to reveal a camera. I hadn't asked for one, so I was genuinely surprised and delighted. It was a Kodak Instamatic, and I even got extra film cartridges and a box of flashcubes to go with it! I knew exactly what the subject of my first pictures would be.

"You have one more, Eddie," my father said as I loaded the film in my camera.

"This one?"

"Yes, open it."

"It's just an empty box."

"No it isn't. Open it."

With renewed enthusiasm, Eddie sat up on the couch and opened the box. Inside he found a folded sheet of paper. *Look in the garage*, was what it said. Eddie jumped out of his chair and was out the door yelling, "It's a car! It has to be a car!"

"No way! That's so unfair," I shouted, forgetting my camera and running close behind him. My father and mother caught up as we all stood in front of the garage door.

"It's not a car," my father said.

"How could you think we would get you a car?" my mother seemed distressed.

My father pushed up the garage door and stood back. There was a large wooden box with a plastic bag in the middle of the floor.

"Well?"

"You got me a wooden box?"

"¡Ay, Maria Purísima! It's a waterbed! We just haven't filled the mattress with the water yet."

Eddie thought for a minute. "Cool! I got a waterbed."

"How come he got a waterbed? That's so unfair!" I stomped back into the house and went to my room.

Four hours later the living room was still covered in torn wrapping paper and empty boxes, but the waterbed had been filled and made up with new sheets and a bedspread. When my aunt, uncle, and cousins arrived for Christmas dinner, everyone took turns lying down.

"Every time you turn over you're going to wake up," my Tío Rodolfo said.

"*Qué suave*. I like it," said my Tía Panchita. "Let's get one." She gave my uncle a wink.

My cousin, Lulu, kept rolling from side to side to make waves. "This would make me seasick," she said laughing.

"I bet the chicks would like it," her brother, Emilio, whispered to Eddie.



"Letty, take a picture of me on my new bed," Eddie said as he lay down and struck a pose like Burt Reynolds.

The day after Christmas I awoke, and my thoughts immediately turned to Afton's house. I knew I sort of promised that I wouldn't go there without the others, but I was itching for any excuse to use my new camera. I finally convinced myself that my task was of sufficient importance that it could not wait. After all, we would not have learned nearly as much about the house without photographic documentation. Telling my mother that I had to go to the library, I hopped on my bike and rode toward Saint Benedict's instead. As I pedaled toward the playground, I saw a group of boys from my class playing basketball. My plan had been to stash my bike behind the church and walk the rest of the way, but with the boys in the yard, that would draw suspicion. I would have to leave my bike next to the wall in the cul-de-sac. There was nothing to lock it to, so I just wrapped the chain around both wheels. It could easily be picked up and carried off, but I was willing to take the risk.

Climbing over the wall, I was in my garden within seconds. Not having my friends along, I could take my time and study the vegetation around me. But it was the middle of winter, so there wasn't much to look at in the way of flowers. Colorful nevertheless, a bird's nest that had fallen out of a tree, gopher holes were partially hidden below the bushes, and scurrying squirrels hurried across my path as I headed toward the house. It looked lonely against the gray sky. The greenery that surrounded it in September had retreated for its winter nap.

I approached with heightened vigilance, a bit nervous about being alone. Although there was no reason to doubt that I was completely by myself, I,

oh so quietly, slowly approached the house. I settled on the front steps for a few minutes as a way to say "hello" to my old friend.

Wandering around, I took pictures from every angle. As I walked backward in the front yard to get the whole house in view, I tripped on a root of the sycamore tree. *Perfect*, I thought. I could climb the tree and get an even better angle. The sparrows protested as I ascended, but I wouldn't be long. Sitting in my tree, I felt an overwhelming sense of serenity. *I could stay here forever*, I thought as I closed my eyes. There was not the sound of a car, nor a bus, nor a television. Not even a human voice to disrupt my drifting mind. If I hadn't been afraid of falling, I would have curled up and taken a nap right on my branch like a newborn babe sleeping in its mother's arms.

Time passed as hundreds of fledgling thoughts fluttered through my mind, but reality hit and snapped me out of my fantasy. How long have I been gone from home? I climbed down. Reluctant to leave, I walked back to the wall where my bike was waiting on the other side to carry me home. Remembering that I had better come home with a library book, I took a detour downtown. Stopping first to drop off my film at the drugstore, I headed to the city library. I locked my bike and hurriedly made my way toward the young adult section. Walking past the "New Fiction" table, something caught my eye. *The Exorcist* was sitting right on top. I'd heard the book was really scary but didn't actually know anyone who had read it yet. I hesitated a moment then decided, looks good, so I checked it out.

Turning the corner, I rode up the driveway of my apartment building and nearly ran over Manny. "Get out of the way! A car would have run you over."

"Be careful," he shouted in return. The cutest little black puppy I'd ever seen barked at me in agreement.

"Kyle got a new dog for Christmas." Diego's excitement was second only to the puppy's.

"Oh, he's so cute! Come here boy." I lifted him to my chest and held him close. "What's his name?" I asked Kyle.

"Patton."

"Huh?"

"You know, General Patton from World War II. His name's Patton."

Figures, *I* thought as I rolled my eyes. "Hey, Patty," I said as he bit my finger and then proceeded to pee on me. Handing him back to Kyle, I went into my house hoping I didn't smell like dog pee. Not seeing anyone around, I hurried to my room and threw the library book on my bed.

"What took you so long?" my mother asked, sneaking up behind me.

"I couldn't decide what book to check out," I lied.

"Did you get something nice?"

"Yeah, it's about a priest."



On the Monday after New Year's, I couldn't wait to catch up with my three friends and plan a visit to Afton's house. Claire was being dropped off in front of the church. So I ran over to her. "Hi," I said. "How was your vacation?"

"What did you do to your hair?" she asked the minute she saw me.

"I got it cut in a shag. What do you think?"

She said it looked good, but for some reason I didn't believe her. Debbie and Lynn showed up a few minutes later.

"How was Christmas at your grandparents' house?" I asked Lynn. "Was it cold? Did it snow? Did you make a snowman?"

"Yeah, it was fun, but what did you do to your hair?"

"It's a shag. Like it?"

"It makes you look like a boy."

"Does not!" I looked at Debbie for confirmation. She nodded her head in agreement with Lynn and Claire.

The bell rang, and I walked to class downhearted.

After a quick discussion at recess, we decided to go to Afton's house right after school.

"You guys didn't go there while I was gone did you?" Lynn asked.

"No. Didn't we promise?" both Debbie and Claire said.

I remained silent on that point. What they didn't know wouldn't hurt anyone.

"I brought the new camera I got for Christmas. I want to take pictures of you guys at the house."

"Okay, cool!"

Froggie had us reading *The Lord of the Flies*. The boys liked it since it was full of blood and guts, but I knew sooner or later we were going to have to figure out what it all meant.

"Okay, let's list the major plot points on the board." Froggie stood armed with the ubiquitous piece of chalk. "First, who are the main characters? Letty?"

"Ralph, Piggy, and Jack."

"Great. Now what do you think is the overall theme of the story?" asked Mr. Chappel.

Mitch raised his hand, which was astonishing in that he never raised his hand. "It proves that kids can survive without adults telling them what to do all the time."

Froggie pursed his lips. "Well, hmmm. Okay. Anyone else? Yes, Debbie?"

"The theme of the story is being civilized versus being a savage."

Froggie seemed relieved. "Yes, excellent. Can you please elaborate?"

"Well, I think it shows that if a group of people want to live in a civilized way, they have to work at it. Otherwise, they just naturally give in to evilness and return to the wild."

Hmmm. I could see the class thinking. Then hands shot up. Everyone had something to say.

"The only people who can resist evil are the ones who believe in God, so the kids who became savages obviously weren't Christians," said Peter.

"God is working through the main character to keep all the other boys in line, and the antagonist is the devil who is leading them astray," was Blythe's analysis.

"But, remember, God gives everyone free will," said Helen.

"Then why is my mom always saying, 'God willing'?" asked a voice from the back of the room.

"Does the Devil give everyone free will?" asked Tim.

"You know, if people would just follow the teachings of the Maharishi, then we'd have world peace because of everyone living in harmony and love and peace," said Suzette.

"Why does everything have to be related to religion? Why can't a story just be a story?" a boy asked.

"If those were girls on that island instead of boys, there never would have been a problem. Girls can solve problems without violence." Some girls murmured in agreement.

"Girls aren't any better than boys. Look how you guys act during lunch and recess."

"At least we don't get in fights and beat each other up after school."

"Because you'd all start crying."

Froggie threw up his hands. "Okay, okay," he said as he rubbed his forehead. "Why don't all of you write a paragraph to explain the theme of the book and turn it in tomorrow?" The moaning was drowned out by the lunch bell.

It rained lightly that afternoon. I managed to whisper to Lynn during social studies class. "Should we still go to the house?"

"Yeah, it's been over two weeks, and it's barely sprinkling. Let's go."

"But it might be muddy."

"Maybe not too much." Lynn looked up to see Sister Frances Joseph looking back at her.

"Miss Whitley, are you finished with your work?"

"No, Sister."



"Then I suggest you focus on your assignment and refrain from further conversation with Miss Marquez."

The sky had cleared by the time the dismissal bell rang, and the sun was drying the asphalt on the playground, making the air muggy. The little kids were stomping in what were left of the puddles. Diego was among them, but I didn't have the time to scold him. He would have to take his chances with my mother.

Quickly, we climbed the wall and entered the garden. It was muddy, but we continued on anyway. I had my camera with me, and I was eager to get some pictures of the house with my friends.

"Stand on the steps so I can take your picture," I instructed them. "Say 'cheese.'" I took the picture, advanced the film, and then squeezed the camera into the back pocket of my shorts. "I'm going to climb the tree to get a different angle. Don't move." I yelled over my shoulder as I ran

toward one of the sycamore trees. The soles of my shoes were muddy and that made it difficult to get a good footing. However, I managed to climb about ten feet off the ground, stretch out on a limb, and aim my camera.

"Hurry up," Claire called out. "It's cold standing here."

As soon as I got my picture, Claire and the others ran toward the trees. Lynn hopped up to the spot where the branches separated. It created a perfect place to stand while deciding which branch to climb next. She stepped up to the next higher branch and reached up to a limb just beyond her grasp. Debbie and Claire were right behind awaiting their turn. I looked through the viewfinder of my camera pretending to be an award-winning nature photographer and prepared to take a picture of the cerulean sky through the branches. The air smelled clean after the rain, and the leaves sparkled with the sun reflecting on stubborn rain drops. A loud thud made me turn my head to see Lynn sprawled out across the roots of the tree.

"Oh, my God! Are you okay?" we all shouted at once. Lynn didn't say anything, but we knew she wasn't dead because she was still moving.

Debbie and Claire gathered around as I scrambled down the tree. Claire and I tried to help her up, but she screamed, "Don't touch me! Don't touch me!"

"Why? What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm okay."

"Then get up."

"I can't." She managed to turn herself over cradling her left arm with her right, near tears. "My arm! I hurt my arm." She sat for several more seconds with her eyes closed gently rocking back and forth.

"Try to get up," said Debbie, clearly agitated.

"No! Let me sit here just a few more minutes."

Her face contorted in pain, but she didn't make a sound. Chills permeated my arms and legs as I watched her suffer. Eventually we got her to stand.

"We better get her home," Claire said, so we slowly walked her to the wall.

"How is she going to climb the wall?" Debbie asked.

That was an excellent question. Lynn was obviously in a lot of pain, and her good arm was still holding the injured one.

"We can lift her up to the top of the wall and she can jump down."

"Can you use your right arm to balance yourself on the top of the wall if we lift you?"

"I don't know." She tried letting go of her left arm to see if it was okay. We could all see that it had swollen significantly. "Maybe."

We tried to work out a plan before attempting to lift her.

"She could stand on my knee while you and Claire help push her up to the top."

"Okay, let's try that."

I started to get down on one knee and realized I would be kneeling in the mud. "Wait. I need to gather some leaves or something, or I'm going to be covered in mud."

"Here," said Claire, "just step on my hands." She interlaced her fingers and held them down for Lynn to prop her foot. Letting go of her injured arm, Lynn held onto my shoulder as Debbie steadied her back. She did two quick practice hops and then jumped up.

"I can't grab the wall."

Lynn would have had to let go of my shoulder to maneuver herself on top of the wall. I tried to guide her hand, but she wouldn't let go. "Let me down."

"What are we going to do?"

"I don't know."

"She needs something to stand on to get her high enough to sit on the wall."

"And I'm going to need something to climb down on, too. It will hurt too much for me to jump."

We walked around the garden looking for something Lynn could stand on. Maybe there was an old crate or a wheel barrel hidden in the bushes. Looking about, I walked toward the wrought iron portion of the fence. We always stayed far away from it so as to not be seen from the street. I wandered over there, nevertheless, in search of something we could use. Being careful to stay hidden, I noticed that the wrought iron portion of the fence sat on a brick wall about two feet up from the ground. The wrought iron part had spikes, but the brick pilasters were flat on top. I ran back to get the others.

"Hey, you guys, come follow me," I beckoned. "What do you think about this? Lynn could step on the little wall under the wrought iron fence.

Then she could hold onto the bars and place her foot on the part that's screwed into the bricks."

"Yeah, look Lynn, you could sit on top to swing your legs over and then climb down the other side," Claire said.

"But we could be seen by anyone on the street," protested Debbie.

"What else can we do?"

"Do you have a better plan?"

"What do you think, Lynn?"

Lynn was trying to be brave. "I think I'm going to throw up," she said, bending over, but she was to the point that she didn't much care as long as she got out. "Just tell me what you want me to do?"

"Here, let me try first. Just watch."

I walked up to the fence and looked up and down the street. There were a few kids down the street on the playground still waiting for their parents to pick them up. They were standing by the gate facing the other direction and talking among themselves. I couldn't see any other people or cars, so I quickly stepped on the low wall while grabbing the bar with my right hand just as Lynn would have to do. My foot easily fit on the cross slat of the fence that was screwed into the brick pilaster.

"Claire, hold your hand next to the bricks so I can get a better footing."

She did as I asked, and I easily lifted myself up to sit on top of the pilaster with one hand.

"Just go down the same way," I explained to Lynn as I climbed down. "I'll stay on this side to help balance you."

"Are you ready?"

"Wait. Here comes a car." A tan sedan pulled up next to the schoolyard gate and a little kid got in. We waited until it had turned the corner.

"Okay, go."

With the help of Claire and Debbie, Lynn made it up to the top of the pilaster without much trouble. Visibly shaking, she was a little more hesitant coming down on the other side, but she managed.

"We'll walk you home. What are you going to tell your parents?"

"I don't know yet. I'll think of something."

We left Lynn on her front doorstep at her insistence. I walked Claire and Debbie to their bus stop.

"I hope she's okay," Debbie said just as her bus pulled up.

"Me, too." But I couldn't help feeling it was a bad omen.

QUESTIONING

OF FAITH

The morning bell rang, and Lynn still had not yet arrived. It wasn't like her to be late. By recess I was growing increasingly concerned.

"What do you think?" I asked Debbie and Claire at recess.

"Let's go find one of her sisters or brothers and ask them," said Debbie.

We headed to the primary grade playground and found Jeanne waiting in the four square line with the other first graders.

"Hi, Jeanne," said Debbie.

"Hi," she said looking up at the three of us.

"Lynn didn't come to school today. Is it because of her arm?"

"Yeah. How did you know?" said Jeanne with wonder in her eyes. Sixyear-olds are so cute.

"Lucky guess," said Claire.

"My mommy is taking her to the doctor's today."

"Can you tell her to call me when you get home?" Debbie asked. Jeanne nodded, and we walked back to our usual spot next to the bottlebrush tree.

"I guess she must be really hurt." Debbie said.

"I hope it isn't broken."

"No. If it was broken her arm would have been all bent out of shape." I twisted my arm around to illustrate my point. "Hers was just really swollen. Maybe just a concussion."

"I think that's only for your head."

"Okay, whatever."

The bell sent us in for Froggie's literature class. We opened our books. Lynn and her arm were forgotten as the suspense mounted in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery."

At four o'clock I was still thinking about the story and how drawing the little slip of paper could seal my fate. It gave me a chill. Mr. Chappel sure had a warped sense of literature. My thoughts were interrupted when the phone rang. It was Debbie. "Lynn just called me. She has a fractured ulna."

"A what?"

"Her arm's broken."

"Oh, my God! Did she tell her parents about how it happened?"

"She told them she fell off the curb crossing the street."

"They bought it?"

"I guess so. I gotta call Claire. I'll see you tomorrow."

The next day, Lynn was the focus of attention. Everyone gathered around wanting to know how she broke her arm. She was a very convincing liar. At recess, Claire, Debbie, and I were the first ones who got to sign her cast. Claire drew a picture of a tree, and we each wrote our names in the shape of branches.

"How long do you have to have the cast on?" I asked.

"Six weeks, so I'm going to miss the first few weeks of softball practice. Plus, it's my pitching arm."

"Oh! Bummer," I said sympathetically. Lynn and her sports were one in the same.

"Does that mean we won't be able to go to Afton's house for six weeks?" Debbie asked.

"It doesn't hurt that much anymore, and I can still use my hand. See." She wiggled her fingers to show us.

"Ugh! Look who's coming," Claire warned as she saw Wanda heading straight toward us. She stopped just short of us and crossed her arms.

"I know about your secret house," was Wanda's declaration delivered with an air of triumph and superiority.

"We don't know what you are talking about," I responded with disdain.

"Sure you do." She flipped her hair back and re-crossed her arms. "I saw you guys climbing over that fence across the street two days ago. There's a house over there called the Fellows House. My brother told me about it. He said that an old woman used to live there a long time ago. She was murdered and her bones are buried in the basement. That's why it's abandoned and all locked up. When he was in high school, the kids used to go there to hang out. He used to go there and make out with his girlfriend before he enlisted."

"That's so gross. Why would your brother tell you about making out with his girlfriend?" I asked. "Especially if a body is buried in the basement."

"He says a lot of weird things ever since he got wounded in 'Nam." For a second, Wanda almost looked sympathetic, but she immediately converted back to type. "He has a purple heart just like my dad. My dad was a waist gunner on a B-17 during World War II. My whole family is made up of decorated war veterans."

I rolled my eyes. Yeah, we've all heard this story before, I thought.

"Anyway, I was telling him how stupid it is for you guys to get all emotional over a dead dog when so many boys are being killed and wounded in the war."

"Is your life so boring that you have to talk to your brother about us?" Lynn retorted.

"I talk to my brother about all sorts of things. It helps keep his mind focused. He saw a lot of action in 'Nam."

"Then how do you know he's telling you the truth about the house and not making it up?" Lynn said. "My dad said that lots of soldiers in Vietnam are using drugs and becoming addicts. If he dropped acid in Vietnam, he probably hallucinates about stuff."

"My brother's not a drug addict!"

"The newspaper says that soldiers are using heroin to deal with the stress. That's why we're losing the war."

"We're not losing. You don't know what you're talking about!"

"Obviously you don't know what you're talking about. Two months ago, the newspaper said that some soldiers were refusing to go out on patrol. My dad said that soldiers wouldn't engage in combat refusal unless they knew the cause was hopeless."

Lynn needed to be a lawyer like her dad. She could argue better than anyone I knew. I could tell Lynn hit Wanda where it hurt. She *didn't* know everything. Wanda was about to say something, but instead she turned and stomped away with venom in her eyes.

"You really pissed her off," I said, patting Lynn on the back.

"Good! She's such a bitch."

"Do you think her brother really knows about Afton's house?" A thread of anxiety worked its way through me as I contemplated the possibility that other people might know about our house.

"How would they have gotten to it? Do you really think he and his girlfriend climbed the wall like we do?" Debbie asked.

That's when it suddenly occurred to me, "Maybe there's another way in?" I silently contemplated the possibilities.

"Well, if you think about it," Lynn said. "No one would have fenced in the house without putting a gate or something somewhere."

"That makes sense. Why didn't we think of that before?"

"We better check it out," Lynn was quick to take charge. "Can all of you go this Saturday?"

All this time we never ventured beyond the sycamore trees in front of the house, nor the grounds behind it where we climbed over the wall. It dawned on me that maybe we didn't know Afton's house as well as we thought we did.

I turned my head to look across the playground at the treetops behind the fence of our beloved house. Was there another way in?



It continued to rain that Saturday, and none of our mothers would let us out of the house. Our search for another way into the grounds around Afton's house would have to wait until next week. I laid on my bed and thought about raindrops splashing on the cone roof. Would rain seep in through the door we left open in the courtyard? I wanted to be there. I wanted to sit in a big, overstuffed chair by the fireplace in the parlor, warm and safe. I imagined a Tiffany lamp over my shoulder illuminating the pages of a romantic novel, and little Piper would be alive and happily sleeping at my feet. Instead, I was shut up in my bedroom and had to soothe myself with my record albums or a good book. I decided to open *Wuthering Heights* and sit next to my window to read. The raindrops against the glass brought the moors to life and made me ache with melancholy longing for a life that wasn't mine.

Twenty-four hours wasn't enough to clear the skies, so Sunday started out much the same as Saturday. Eddie, Manny, and Diego brought their war game into the house. The spaces behind the couch and loveseat became the trenches and the upturned coffee table became a prime spot from which to launch hand grenades. My mother quickly went insane with my three brothers destroying the living room.

"¡Ya basta!" she would say. "In my next life I'm not having any children."

Thanks a lot, Mom, I thought. She didn't want to be living her life any more than I wanted to be living mine. Was I going to end up like her? Then it dawned on me what the Rolling Stones meant by "Mother's Little Helper." Obviously hippies weren't the only ones looking to escape.

My salvation came that afternoon when Lynn called and asked if I could meet Claire and her downtown to see a movie. Luckily I caught my father in a good mood and asked him if we could pick Debbie up and then take us to the Fox Theater. Getting in the car, he even gave me money for the ticket. Lynn and Claire were waiting for us out in front of the theater, and we all went in to see *Silent Running*. Forested domes floating through space seemed like a good escape from the problems here on earth. But two hours and a tub of popcorn later, we were back outside. The rain had stopped so we decided to walk home; although home was the last place I wanted to be.

Walking through Crystal Glen Park to kill time, we saw Paul, Steve, and Mitch, boys from school, hanging out on the swings. All three were considered the bad boys of the school, biding their time until they were each expelled one by one.

Coyly, we wandered over to where they were sitting. "Hi," we said in unison.

They each gave a grunt and a nod as a response.

"What are you guys doing?"

"Nothing," Mitch finally said. Paul and Steve looked away.

"We just got out of the movies," Lynn said, tucking her hair behind her ear.

"Whatcha see?"

"Silent Running."

"Any good?"

"Yeah, it was about the last forest left in the universe."

"Bruce Dern is in it," I added. "He's kinda cute."

They always appeared aloof, but even still, they were acting weird.

"What are you hiding behind your back?" Lynn pried.

They didn't respond for a second or two. Then Mitch said, "Weed." "Oh," I said.

"Wanna take a drag?" Mitch held the joint out for me.

"Uh," I said quickly, glancing over at Debbie.

"Do you or don't you?"

I knew that one day I would be in this situation, but I hadn't yet decided what I would do. Lynn decided for me. She looked at her watch and said, "We can't right now. Some other time."

"Okay, later," Mitch shrugged.

"Later."

Walking back out of the park in silence we got to the corner, said our goodbyes, and went our own ways. I got home at about four o'clock and went straight to my room. *Wow*, I thought to myself. *A boy actually asked me to smoke pot with him. Does that mean he likes me?* I was giddy at the thought. I wondered if any of the other kids at school smoked pot. Maybe some of them did other drugs like Wanda's brother. What would our principal, Sister Mary Louise, do if she knew?

Monday morning I felt much more grown up. Somehow I had entered a new phase of my life. It was time to start taking control. Although I wasn't allowed to wear make-up, I put on some mascara and hid a tube of lipstick in my pencil pouch. I wanted to wear the new bellbottoms and the tie-dyed t-shirt I got for Christmas, but I had to don my wool plaid uniform skirt and white blouse with the Peter Pan collar.

It was cold in the mornings, so I didn't mind the knee socks, but damn if I was going to wear those white saddle shoes. I reached under my bed in search of my navy blue deck shoes. I was ready to rebel. Besides, my saddle shoes were so in need of polish that no one would even notice that I was wearing blue canvas shoes instead. I put on my P.O.W. bracelet, grabbed my books, and ran out the door to school.

These inconsequential acts of defiance gave me a sense of empowerment nevertheless. I felt I was part of the world—the one that mattered, not the establishment. Imagining myself hitchhiking up to Big Sur and living in a commune, I would become a vegetarian. A nice guy in a Volkswagen van would teach me to play the sitar, and we would sing folk songs to protest the war. Flowers would be delicately placed in my hair on our way to San Francisco.

Walking to school that morning, it seemed as if my opportunities were limitless. I was outgrowing the little Mexican Catholic schoolgirl image. It was time to make a change. I needed to do something else, be something else—something of my own choosing, but I wasn't sure what that was. I needed to find myself. Who was Letty Marquez? I wanted to find a cause

and take a stand. I wanted to stand up to injustice and intolerance. I would have to think about that for a while. There were just too many good causes out there that needed me, and I needed them.

With my new quest for self-discovery, religion class took on new meaning. Destructo began the morning exercises as usual with the pledge of allegiance, the "Our Father," and the Nicene Creed.

"Take out your catechism books and turn to page eighty-six." We all dutifully did as we were told except for Douglas who couldn't find his catechism book. The topic was marriage.

"Marriage is one of the seven sacraments," Destructo said to start the lesson. "As Catholics, you can choose to receive the sacrament of marriage, or you can enter into a religious life and become a nun or a priest."

"Sister Martha?" Renée raised her hand. "Why can't you get married if you're a nun?"

"Because when you become a nun you are married to Jesus. Nuns don't have a family so that they can devote their lives to the service of the Lord," Destructo said.

Behind me I heard Paul whisper to Mitch, "You know why they call them nuns, don't you? None of this and none of that."

I couldn't help but let out a snort.

"Who are priests married to?" asked Helen.

Destructo ignored her. "Who would like to read? Peter?" Peter read the introduction about the sacrament of marriage and how married couples were supposed to have children because children were a gift from God.

Blythe asked, "Why did Mary and Joseph only have one child? They were married, so shouldn't they have had a lot more kids after Jesus was born?"

"Mary is a virgin. She is the mother of God," was Destructo's reply.

"Did she stay a virgin even after Jesus was born? Why didn't God give them any more gifts?"

"Mary and Joseph were special. Reneé, why don't you continue reading?" We continued learning about marriage and gifts from God. Our indoctrination in the ways of good Catholics was never ending.

"How many of you think about how many children you are going to have when you get married?" Destructo asked.

"I want four, two boys and two girls," Blythe declared.

"I want a lot, six or seven," said a red-haired girl.

"I'm only going to have two, one of each," from the front row.

That's what Destructo was hoping for. She had us right where she wanted us.

"It's not up to you to decide how many children you will have after you get married. That's up to God. It's his will."

"My parents don't want to have any more kids, so my mom's on the pill."

Destructo cringed. "Catholics are not allowed to use contraception. You shouldn't interfere with God's plan, even if it seems at first to be a burden. We all have our crosses to carry."

"What's contraception?" asked Douglas. The class giggled with embarrassment, and Destructo ignored him.

"My mother's always saying that my little brother is a really heavy cross," said Reneé.

"Let's continue reading," Destructo said, but the discussion developed a social conscience.

"What about overpopulation?" Suzette asked without being called on. "My cousin is in college, and she read a book called *The Population Bomb* that said that if people keep having babies, we will all starve to death because there won't be enough food."

The class looked at Destructo and waited. She was obviously at a loss for words. How could she not have the answer? The fact that maybe there weren't any answers was budding in my mind. We were all going to starve to death because too many people were having too many babies. Yet, as Catholics, that's what we were supposed to do. Almost every kid in the class had three or four brothers and sisters. Debbie and Lynn came from families with eight kids. Two of my aunts in Mexico had ten kids each!

Destructo finally said, "It's not for us to question God's motives. The Lord will provide. Have faith. It's time to start math. Take out last night's homework and exchange papers with your neighbor."

We were doing algebra. New Math it was called. It had just been invented so no one's parents knew how to do it, especially not mine. They both barely finished elementary school. We were working on exponents. Every time the exponent got bigger, the number got bigger—by a lot. Two times two is four. Two times two is eight, then sixteen, then thirty-two.

I saw people in my head. Millions of people. Babies. We were falling off the planet. Maybe we needed to stop waiting for God to fix things. Maybe there wasn't any God. Maybe it was up to us to fix things. I quickly made the sign of the cross as penance for my blasphemy, but I was still thinking about overpopulation and who was going to fix things. There was too much to fix, and it was making my head hurt.

Science class didn't help. We learned about a lady that wrote a book called *Silent Spring* to explain the dangers of pesticides. The eggshells of peregrine falcons were becoming thinner and endangering the species. Mrs. Burdett across the street used pesticides on her roses all the time. Not only that, but scientists were saying that the world was getting colder and colder because of all the cars making smog. The next ice age was coming soon. I didn't like cold weather. I was becoming miserable, and I still had a headache.

A lot of the other kids in class were feeling the same way. Eventually the kids I walked home with decided to do something about it. We would get in a big group and march along the street chanting, "End the pollution," over and over. If a car passed us that was billowing visible exhaust fumes, we'd holler, "Polluter shooter," and then start coughing uncontrollably. No one paid any attention to us, but we tried. What else could we do? God wasn't doing much.

Our focus on ecology in science class continued to teach us that the blue whale and the leopard were on the endangered species list and that forests were being cut down all over the world. I was told that my children would only see tigers and polar bears in zoos. And although I had only seen tigers and polar bears in zoos myself, the idea upset me. Knowledge was becoming a scary thing.

And if that wasn't enough to worry about, crime was starting to scare me as well. Someone broke into our garage and stole Eddie's ten-speed bike the weekend before. My father made us all look around to see if anything else had been taken before the police got there to take the report. My mother started locking our front door, so we had to start ringing the doorbell every day when we got home from school.

I thought she was overreacting as usual until a few months later when the newspapers reported that even in Washington, D.C., people broke into a giant office building called the Watergate. I started to think about the riots from when I was in the fifth grade and remembered how scared I was. Flipping the channels on the television forced me to catch a glimpse of the news from time to time. I remember seeing footage of the fighting in Vietnam and the coffins of soldiers being taken off airplanes. I thought of Tim Hennessey's brother.

The news was full of death. A year earlier, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin both died of drug overdoses. A lot of kids were using drugs, and not just in the public high school like my mother thought. She had no idea that Paul and his friends from my school were smoking pot and who knows what else. A lot of kids were always saying how they had a friend or a relative at Bishop Thomas, the Catholic high school, who overdosed and was rushed to the hospital. Sometimes he came home and sometimes he died. More and more soldiers fighting in Vietnam were coming home addicted to drugs just like Lynn's dad said. I even heard about a college professor who used LSD. Turn on, tune in, and drop out. If my mother ever heard about Dr. Leary, she'd never let me go to college.

INTRUDERS

Sister Frances Joseph kept the class after school for being too noisy during our history lesson. We would have to wait an additional ten agonizing minutes before we could go explore the far end of the garden around the house. When she finally dismissed us, we ran to Lynn's house to ditch our books, remove our skirts from over our shorts, and climb over the wall. This was Lynn's first attempt at climbing the wall since she broke her arm. We had to help hold her up until she could get a firm hold with her good arm. Once she was on top, she swung her legs over and jumped down like a pro.

The path to the house was becoming well worn. The bricks were no longer covered with dirt and garden debris. The branches on the bushes eventually broke off, eliminating the need to push them aside as we passed. We walked around the house once as was our custom, looking up at the second floor windows and examining the walls and vegetation to verify that nothing had changed, that no interloper had disturbed our sanctuary.

"Which way should we go first?" asked Debbie.

"Let's go that way," Lynn commanded as she pointed to the sycamore trees and the bushes beyond them. We walked across the front yard, under the canopy of the majestic trees, and entered the densely overgrown bushes. Trampling through virgin brush scratched our arms and legs, but we were undeterred. The leaves were still wet from the weekend's rain, so the branches met us with little splashes of water.

"We can't get through here," Debbie said, wiping water out of her eye. "Yeah, let's go back."

Returning to the clearing, we set off in another direction. Again we trampled through the brush like wildlife explorers on safari. Less dense, the brush on the west side of the clearing allowed us to make our way through more easily. We continued on and within a minute or two, we found ourselves on another brick pathway. Following it as it curved around an overgrown bougainvillea, a burst of sunlight stopped us dead in our tracks.

In front of us, a parking lot filled with cars covered acres of asphalt behind Gerard Case Memorial Hospital.

"This has been here the whole time?" Claire said, somewhat bewildered.

"How could we have been so stupid? We all know the story of the house. Of course you can get here from the hospital. I guess it just never occurred to us not to climb the wall," Lynn rationalized.

"This doesn't mean that other people go to the house." I became defensive, territorial, protective of my property. "The path is overgrown with bushes and that thorny bougainvillea. Obviously, people don't come here very often."

"Yeah, people probably don't come here at all. Who goes to the hospital and then starts wandering through the bushes in the parking lot?" Debbie was right.

"The point is that there is another way in. Anyone who wants to get to the house can just take this path." Claire's statement sobered me to the fact.

"Let's go back," I said, anxious to shield myself from this reality.

Downcast, we quietly walked back along the newly discovered brick pathway. It was obvious that it wasn't used much. Some of the bricks were missing, and puddles of mud made us walk through the bushes to get around them. This lifted my spirits, confirming my theory that the path was long forgotten until Debbie shouted, "Stop! What's that?" We looked to see what she was pointing at. On the ground below a bush was a small pile of trash.

Upon closer inspection Lynn said, "It's beer bottles. Look." She lifted an empty bottle of Pabst Blue Ribbon. "And look at all these cigarette butts scattered every-where."

"So someone *has* been here," I said with disappointment. "Not just Wanda's brother either." Somehow I felt as if I'd been betrayed. Did the house have other visitors it was keeping from us? Was it being unfaithful? I was hurt by the thought.

When we got back, we sat on the front steps, chins in our hands.

"This is stupid. No one ever comes here anymore," Lynn said. "Those beer bottles have probably been there for years."

"How do you know? You and your brother came here just a few months ago."

"Oh yeah, that's right." I had forgotten about Lynn's brother. "Your brother knows about Afton's house, too." We all looked at Lynn as if she

had just committed a crime.

"He hasn't been back since we found it," Lynn assured us, although I could hear doubt in her voice.

"How do you know?"

"He would have told me."

"Have you told him that we come here all the time?"

"No."

"Well then, how do you know he doesn't come here or that he hasn't told all his friends?"

"I'll ask him, but I know he hasn't. Why would a bunch of boys care about an abandoned house?"

The possibilities flooded my mind. I could think of a thousand reasons why twelve-year-old boys would care about an abandoned house.

My older brother, Eddie, and his friend Ray from across the street were walking wrecking balls. Ray used to throw baseballs at the streetlights—hands raised in exultation when the glass shattered. Abandoned baseball bats or two-by-fours often met their doom when bashed against concrete walls or metal poles until splinters flew in all directions.

Ray especially liked to blow things up. He and Eddie would experiment by putting firecrackers in trash cans and the downspouts of rain gutters. On one Fourth of July, he and Eddie went a little too far in firing a rocket that landed on the cat lady's roof. Ray's and Eddie's laughter was soon drowned out by the sirens from the fire trucks rounding the corner.

Yes, I could think of lots of reasons why boys would be interested in an abandoned house.



We didn't have to wait for Lynn to ask her brother if he had ever been back to the house as it turned out. By the time we got up to leave, a group of boys were noisily stepping out from the bushes in the direction of the wall. Lynn's brother was among them.

Abashed, she confronted him. "What are you doing here, Alex?" she demanded.

"Nothing. What are you doing here?" He didn't seem too surprised to see us.

"We're just hanging out."

"That's what we're doing."

"How often do you guys hang out here?" Claire asked.

"Every now and then. What's it to you?"

"Just wondering." We had to play it cool.

"You can't get in, you know. All the windows and doors are locked," one of the other boys interjected. They'd obviously tried.

"We know," Claire said. I was relieved that she wasn't about to give any indication that we had discovered a way inside.

"It's more fun to climb the trees," said one of the other boys.

The little one with the gapped teeth said, "Let's go," and they all ran toward the sycamore trees.

"Watch your step climbing that tree," Lynn called out to her brother.

Lynn, Claire, Debbie, and I looked at each other. I felt a mixture of fear and frustration. If those boys knew about the house, how many other kids did as well?

"How come we never ran into anyone before? We come here all the time!" said Claire as she stomped her foot.

"It's just a coincidence. They probably hardly ever come here, and when they do, look, they just climb the trees." This was all speculation on my part, and by saying it, I was trying to make it true.

"The house has been here for almost a hundred years. Nothing is going to happen to it just because a bunch of boys start hanging around," said Lynn, being her reasonable self.

"But it won't be our special place anymore if other kids know about it." Debbie was just as ill-tempered as Claire was about the whole thing.

It was getting late. "Let's talk about it tomorrow," I said. "I have to go home or I'm gonna get grounded again."

Looking over at the boys in our trees made me both angry and sad. But what could I do?

We each climbed the wall and headed home. I had to run most of the way to get there before it got dark. I didn't like this recent development with Afton's house one bit, but the reality of the situation was sinking in. Of course, people knew about the house. Someone locked the doors and nailed the windows shut. Someone built the wall. Why did things have to change? Was this what it was like growing up? Reality was beginning to ruin my fanciful dreams.

I didn't feel like eating dinner and instead went to my room and closed the door. I put on my Cat Steven's album, lay down on my bed, and closed my eyes wistfully listening to "Peace Train." Why couldn't we live in bliss? I could hear my brothers roughhousing in the living room, so I turned up the volume. I knew my mom would be in here any minute telling me to turn it down. Instead, I heard her yelling at Manny and Diego to behave. I thought about the peacefulness of Afton's house on a warm summer day. I pictured myself on the veranda slowly rocking in a porch swing enjoying the gentle breeze that smelled of jasmine. The garden would be soothing to my eyes and my ears would only hear the sweet melody of a goldfinch singing in the sycamore trees.

Crash!

Manny burst into my room with Diego in a headlock. Diego's skinny little arms were flailing about searching for something to grab on to. Manny was laughing as he held on.

"Get out!" I screamed.

"Help me, Letty!" pleaded Diego.

"Manny, let him go and get out!"

He ignored me and wrestled Diego to my bed landing on my legs. I struggled to pull my right leg out from underneath them and hit Manny on his back with the heel of my foot. Still laughing, he rolled over and pushed Diego across the room. A moment after Diego collided with the closet door, I heard a screech that only a needle against vinyl can make seconds before the thud of something heavy landing on the carpet. My room was instantly silent. The record player was on the floor as was my *Teaser and the Firecat* album, broken in two.

For a second both of my brothers froze, and then Manny ran out of my room followed by Diego.

"Mom!" I screamed. "Manny broke my record."

"No I didn't." I could hear from the boys' room. "Diego did."

"¡Ya duermanse, todos!" was my mother's solution.

"But it's only seven o'clock," Manny protested.

"You're going to pay for it, Manny," I shouted.

"Dije qué se duermen."

I slammed my door and picked up the pieces of my record, angrily throwing them in the trash. I replaced my record player to its position on my dresser and was relieved to see that it still worked. It was turning out to be a horrible day. Tears welled in my eyes as I picked up the empty album cover. Sometimes I hated my family.

FESTIVAL

That weekend was the parish festival. It was the biggest fundraiser for the year. Early Wednesday morning the playground was off limits so the carnival company could bring in the rides on giant trucks. The little kids watched eagerly as the workers set up the merry-go-round and the pony ride outside their classrooms. The bigger kids anticipated the terror of the Sizzler, the Tilt-a-Whirl, and the Zipper.

Each grade level had an assigned booth that parent volunteers had to man. My eighth grade class had the ping-pong ball in the fishbowl booth. I knew my parents would never volunteer since my father worked nights and my mother couldn't speak English. But my family wasn't off the hook that easily. My little brother's class was in charge of the cakewalk, so his teacher, Mrs. Merry, sent my mother a note asking for her to donate a homebaked cake.

"What kind should I make?" my mother asked me.

"Chocolate."

"Bueno," she said, "here's some money. Go to the store and buy a box of cake mix and a box of frosting." So much for homemade.

After much begging, pleading, and promising that the nuns would be out in full force to chaperone, I finally convinced my mother to let me go to the festival on Saturday night. Debbie's mom came by and picked me up early that evening with the promise that she would have me home by nine-thirty. Debbie and I met Lynn and Claire at five o'clock next to the throw a dime in the crystal booth.

"What do you want to ride first?" Debbie asked.

Before I could answer, Lynn interrupted. "You know what, you guys? We come to the festival every year, but we've never been to Afton's house at night. What do you think about sneaking over there for a few minutes before it gets really dark?" I could tell that Claire and Debbie were a bit hesitant. I wasn't exactly jumping at the suggestion myself.

"Well?"

"It'll be dark inside the house. We really shouldn't go in without a flashlight or something," I said.

"We don't need to go inside. Let's just walk around it."

"Okay, but we can't be gone too long because my mom wants me to check in with her every thirty minutes," Debbie said.

Claire and I nodded in agreement.

Thinking no one would see us if we left through the side gate, we took off around the auditorium. The side yard was filling up with every make and model of station wagon and family sedan in town. We hesitated, unsure of what to do.

"Let's just walk out. No one is going to pay any attention to us. Who cares where we're going?" I shrugged as I boldly headed toward the street. The others followed.

"Hey, Lynn Whitley," came a shout from behind us.

"Where are you going?" It was Peter Byers, a boy in our class. "The festival's this way."

"I left my jacket in her mom's car," shouted Claire in response. "We're just going to get it."

We took off running.

Once over the wall to the garden, the twilight eerily disappeared, and the moon had not yet made an appearance. We walked silently as one does in the dark to not awaken whatever might be sleeping. The house appeared slowly through the darkness as we approached. Still and silent, it seemed to be aware of our presence. The sound made by the crunching of leaves under our feet was deafening. Just as we were to step out into the clearing, Claire whispered us a warning, "Stop! Look, there's a light."

We ducked down as if taking cover from sniper fire.

"Where? I don't see anything," said Lynn.

"Look, there." She pointed at the second floor window of the turret. For a second, I, too, saw a light, and then it was gone.

"Shhh, someone's inside," Lynn whispered.

We stood perfectly still waiting for confirmation of what we had seen.

"What should we do?" True fear seeped into my soul.

"Nothing. Wait," Lynn said. We sat frozen in the bushes, eyes aimed at the window. "There it is! Someone's walking back and forth."

"Who could it be? No one lives there. We've been all through that house," Claire said. "Do you think your brother and his friends found the

way in?"

"Maybe a bum sleeps there at night," I speculated.

"How would he get in? Everything's locked."

"We got in," Lynn reminded us.

The light shined again. We were transfixed. It moved across the room every few seconds with amazing regularity.

"Wait a second. Why is it only moving in one direction?" I asked.

"Yeah. Someone must be walking in circles," Debbie reasoned.

"Let's go over there to see if we can get a better view." Lynn pointed to a giant camellia bush. "Stay low."

She led us a few steps along the edge of the clearing. The light changed from yellow to blue and then to green. Little sparkles of red could be seen twinkling in the background.

"It's a ghost!" Debbie gasped and nearly broke into tears. I held her hand.

"Shhh, shhh! Wait a second," Lynn said. A few seconds later she stood up straight in clear view of the house. "Oh jeez! That's just a reflection of the Ferris wheel in the school yard."

Hesitantly, the rest of us stood up and looked back toward the direction of the school.

"Oh, yeah." I let go of Debbie's hand feeling a little silly.

"Whoa! That really scared me for a second." Claire was smiling with relief.

"Me, too."

We stood and watched the lights in silence.

"Let's go back to the festival. I'm all spooked," Debbie said.

"Just once around the house to say we've been here at night," Lynn proposed.

The four of us ran to the front of the house and up the steps. We looked in the windows, but all was dark. Down the steps, we continued around the house to the trellis. We could barely see it against the house in the dark.

"Okay. Let's go," Claire ordered before Lynn got any ideas.

"We'll come back at night in the spring when it doesn't get dark so early."

"Yeah, we can climb the roof and watch the sun set." The house always made me feel romantic.

Back on the playground, we quickly got into the excitement of the festival. "What do you guys want to do first?" asked Claire. It was her first festival since she was new at Saint Benedict's.

"Let's go on the Ferris wheel. I bet we can see the window of the turret room at Afton's house from up there."

"Okay!" we all said at once. We ran to buy our tickets and got in line for the Ferris wheel. Jeff Hanover and Peter Byers were already there.

"Where's your jacket?" Peter asked Claire.

"Huh? Oh, I changed my mind," she answered. "It's not that cold."

The two boys were the most popular at school. Peter was the fastest runner and the best basketball player in the eighth grade, and Jeff was so cute that he made the rest of us feel a bit bashful. He had bright green eyes and sandy blonde hair that he kept cut like David Cassidy from *The Partridge Family*.

"Why are your bell bottoms all covered in dirt?" Jeff asked.

"And you've got a twig in your hair," said Peter reaching up to remove a piece of azalea from Lynn's hair.

He was right, and we each looked at each other wondering what to say. Dusting herself off, Lynn said, "I dropped the key to my mom's car when we went to get Claire's jacket, so we had to get down and look for it in the dark."

"Oh. How long are you guys staying?" Peter asked.

"Til nine-thirty."

"That's cool. Be careful when you walk over by the tree next to Destructo's class. Everybody who gets off the Tilt-a-Whirl goes over there to barf."

"Yuck. Thanks for the warning."

The Ferris wheel came to a stop, and the attendant started loading the people in the line. I sat with Claire in the chair right behind Jeff and Peter. When our chair reached the highest point, Claire and I lifted ourselves as high as we dared and looked over towards Afton's house. It was too dark to see anything except for the glowing lights of the Fox Theater in the distance.

"See it?" Debbie shouted from behind us.

"No." Seconds later Lynn and Debbie had reached the top.

"See it?" Claire and I shouted together.

"No."

"What are you guys looking for?" shouted Jeff.

"Uh, nothing."

"My house," responded quickly Lynn. "I live in the cul-de-sac over there." She realized we needed to keep quiet about the house and not make the same mistake we made with Wanda a few weeks ago.

When we got off the Ferris wheel, Jeff and Peter were waiting for us.

"Want to go in the House of Mirrors?" Peter asked Lynn.

"Okay," Lynn said, looking at the rest of us.

"We'll wait here," Debbie said.

"No, let's all go," insisted Lynn, so we all got in the line for the House of Mirrors.

For the first time in my life, I saw Lynn look nervous. Preparing for finals, making our confirmation, climbing trellises, exploring abandoned houses, nothing compared to the thought that Peter might like her. My own palms started to sweat when Jeff got in line behind me. I could sense that he stood a little closer than necessary.

Inside the House of Mirrors, we kept bumping into each other as we worked our way through the maze. Emerging a bit off balance, we stood in front of the wavy mirrors to laugh at our distorted selves. I moved to the one that made me look long and skinny with a fat head. Jeff came and stood next to me, and we both laughed at each other until our eyes met through our reflections. Suddenly bashful, I moved on.

"Let's get something to eat," suggested Debbie. "My mom's working the hot dog booth. Maybe she'll give each of us one for free."

Debbie's mom was so cool. Each of us got a free hot dog with chips, but she made us pay for the sodas.

We headed toward the lunch tables to look for a spot where we could sit down to eat. They were crowded with whole families having their dinners of festival food. The jubilant air smelled of corn-on-the-cob and barbecue chicken. The aroma of pepperoni pizza was mouth-watering. We finally snagged a spot in the primary school section. The tables were made for little kids, so our knees touched the bottom of the table. Jeff squeezed in next to me, and Peter sat next to Lynn. Debbie and Claire could hardly contain their giggles. Scarfing down their hot dogs and chips in less than five minutes, Debbie and Claire got up to leave.

"Where are you going?" protested Lynn.

"We're going to see if we can find Blythe. She said she was coming tonight."

Lynn and I gave them pleading looks to no avail. They were gone in an instant.

"I like your haircut," Jeff said just as I was taking a bite of my hot dog. All I could do was try to smile and keep my mouth closed.

"Where are you going to go for high school?" he asked after I swallowed.

The question turned my nervousness into despair. "My mother is making me go to Catholic Girl's Academy." My eyes almost welled with tears. I still had not accepted my fate.

"I'm going to Saint Perpetua," he said. "CGA and Perpetua hold dances together."

"They do?"

"Yeah, since Saint Perpetua is an all-boy school and CGA is an all-girl school, they do lots of activities together. Both my brothers go there. My older brother's girlfriend goes to CGA."

If it hadn't been night, I would have sworn that the clouds parted and a ray of sun shone down on me. My life of spinsterhood had ended before it had started.

"Let's ride the Zipper," Peter suggested the minute he devoured the last bite of his hotdog.

"We just ate!" said Lynn.

"Come on, take a walk on the wild side."

Off we went to get in the line for the Zipper. The ride seemed frightening as I looked up from the ground. The carnival colors and neon lights didn't fool me into thinking that the next few minutes would be anything but terrifying. And like most thirteen-year-olds, it was the terror that was appealing.

Jeff and I stood behind Lynn and Peter. The crowd at the festival had grown quite large. Most of the people I had never seen before. I was eternally grateful for that fact when Jeff reached over and held my hand. Being totally unprepared and not knowing what to do, I let him. When we got in the cage, the lap bar gave me an excuse to let go and occupy both my hands. Within seconds, however, nothing mattered since I was going to be slammed to my death when the Zipper took off. If my life flashed before my eyes, I missed it focusing instead at the asphalt rising up to meet me at a

thousand miles an hour. A piercing scream deafened me to my last seconds on earth.

As the night wore on, more kids from our class showed up, and we all spent our time and money going from ride to ride and booth to booth. Claire won a chocolate cake, and Peter won a stuffed zebra for Lynn. Jeff and I weren't so lucky.

At nine o'clock Debbie told me I had better use up the rest of my tickets since her mom promised to have me home by nine-thirty.

"Let's ride the Ferris wheel one more time," Jeff suggested. He held my hand in the line, and when we were seated, he stretched out his left arm and rested it on the back of the chair. He then scooted up close until his thigh was touching mine. I could feel his chest against the back of my arm. I had never been that close to a boy who wasn't related to me. I got a funny tingly feeling inside and was at a loss as to where to look. I had an itch on my arm, but I was afraid to move. When we got to the top he pointed toward the lights of the Fox Theater.

"You know, that's kinda cool," he said. "They shine straight up to the sky."

"What are those lights over there," I asked, prying my trembling hand off the safety bar to point in the opposite direction.

"I bet those are the lights at the high school's stadium. There's something going on there tonight. A battle of the bands, I think." As we began our descent, Jeff started to rock the chair.

"Stop," I pleaded.

"Sorry, did that scare you?"

"Yeah, I don't like heights."

"Okay, I won't do it again." I couldn't believe he was so sweet. I started to relax. By that time, we were headed up to the top again. With his left arm still behind me, he leaned in closer and pointed toward my left with his right arm. "Look at that."

"What? I don't see anything," I said, searching the night sky.

"Over here," he said.

I turned my head to see which direction he was talking about and found that our faces were merely two inches apart. He leaned in and quickly kissed me right on the lips. Taken completely off guard, I started giggling nervously.

"Did you think that was funny?" he seemed hurt.

Trying to regain my self-control, I stammered, "No... I... uh... sorry, but... um, that was nice."

He leaned in and kissed me again. This time I kissed him back. His arms were around me, holding me, as if I could go anywhere. I still didn't know what to do with my hands, so I just kept them on the safety bar. I felt like the entire world was watching us and, for some reason, I didn't care. But I was afraid to move. I could feel the turning of the Ferris wheel, yet the world stood still. The night air was cool, but I began to perspire. I wanted it to last, and I wondered when it would end.

The ride finally stopped, and we were the first ones off. The attendant lifted up our safety bar to let us out. As I walked down from the platform, I could sense a change in my stride. I emerged from that ride a different person. I had turned the corner on another milestone of my life. My lips were now the lips of a woman. I could hear Gary Puckett singing, "This Girl is a Woman Now," as I walked in slow motion.

"Letty, let's go," I heard Debbie calling me and bringing me back down to Earth. *Leticia*, I thought. I am no longer Letty, childish and innocent. One of the great secrets in life had finally been revealed to me. My name is Leticia, mature and worldly.

Turning to Jeff, I said, "I gotta go," with both relief and regret as I ran toward Debbie and her mother.

"Okay, see you at school on Monday," he shouted after me.

Debbie and her mom were waiting for me by their car. I searched their faces to see if they could tell the change in me. That the purity of my soul had been tainted.

"Well, did you have fun?" Mrs. McClain asked, unlocking the door. She didn't seem to notice any difference.

"Yes, I had a good time. Thank you for bringing me." I looked over at Debbie and she had a look that said, *I bet you had a good time*. I gave her the evil eye as I got in her



family car for the ride home.

That week I pretended to ignore Jeff, and he pretended to ignore me. We didn't have many opportunities to interact with each other, being that the

boys and the girls were separated in almost every aspect of the school day. I did catch his eye a time or two, and I saw a quick smile. I got that same tingly feeling again. That's how I knew it wasn't a dream. It really happened.

"Let's go to the Afton's house after school today," Lynn said at lunch that day.

We all agreed and made a dash for the alley the second the bell rang. Once in the house, we made it a habit of lying on the floor of the sunroom with our feet touching and our bodies pointing in the cardinal directions. Claire pointed south because she was from Cuba and in her veins flowed the heat of passion. Lynn chose the East, the direction of the rising sun and all things mystical. Debbie pointed north because she was always top of the class, the aurora borealis of Saint Benedict's. I pointed west toward the wild frontier—a new beginning. In this supine position, we could look at the painting of the sun on the ceiling as we talked.

"So how was it?" Debbie asked me.

"How was what?" I pretended not to know what she was talking about.

"You know what. Kissing Jeff Hanover."

"It was okay. Just like kissing anyone else."

"Yeah, like you've ever kissed anyone else," Claire retorted.

"Why doesn't anyone ask Lynn what it was like kissing Peter Byers?" I said trying to redirect their attention.

"I didn't kiss Peter Byers!"

"Prove it."

"You can't prove a negative." Lynn turned the focus back on me. "Letty never answered the question. What was it like kissing Jeff?"

I couldn't help but smile. "It was nice," I said as I interlaced my fingers to rest the back of my head on my hands. "His lips were soft and moist. And when he touched my tongue with his, it made me feel funny."

"You Frenched him?" Debbie was appalled.

"Funny how?" asked Claire.

I had their undivided attention, so I sat up to face them.

"Like I didn't want to stop. I was so scared that everyone was staring at us, but at the same time I didn't care. I just wished I knew what to do with my hands."

"You're supposed to put your arms around him and play with his hair. That's what my sister, Elaine, does when she makes out with her boyfriend on the couch," Lynn mimicked her sister kissing her boyfriend.

"I was too nervous to move. Plus I was afraid I'd fall off the Ferris wheel! Imagine the morning papers: *Girl Falls to Her Death from Ferris Wheel While Kissing the Cutest Boy in Her Class*. How embarrassing!"

"So, is he your *boy*friend?" Debbie asked.

"No!"

"I wish Eric was my boyfriend. He's so cute." Claire was all smiles as she sat up and wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin on her knees. "I saw him with his parents at the mall the other day. I think he saw me too, but he pretended that he didn't."

"Why don't you tell him that you like him?" I asked.

"No way. What if he doesn't like me back? That would be so humiliating."

"He just needs a little encouragement. I could tell him that you like him and that way he might start thinking about you in that way," offered Lynn. "My sister says, 'You have to plant the seed."

"But what if he doesn't? What if he just laughs at me because I'm so tall and lanky?"

We all laughed at that. Claire was the most beautiful girl I knew. She already had full breasts and curvy hips. Her skin didn't have a single blemish, and, as much as I wanted to be blonde, I would have killed for her dark hair—long, curly, and sexy.

"Are you kidding? You should be a model. Eric is probably too shy to talk to you. You guys are the only black kids in the eighth grade. What other choices do you have? You two should be a couple," Debbie meant well, but it didn't come out right.

"So, what you're saying is that people can only date people of their same race?" Claire asked.

"No, but you know what I mean."

"No, I don't know what you mean. I keep telling you guys that I'm not black. I'm Cuban. Why can't you just accept that?"

I could feel the toxic cloud of the slave argument slowly begin to engulf us.

"If you think that Eric should have a black girlfriend, then that means he shouldn't like me." Claire continued talking louder and faster. "You don't seem to have a problem with Letty kissing Jeff, a white boy."

Claire's comment knocked me over. I suddenly felt self-conscious. Lynn looked tense, and Debbie started to wheeze. Claire was visibly either angry or hurt, maybe both. We sat quietly for a few more minutes.

"What time is it?" Lynn nearly shouted.

"A quarter to four."

"Crap! I have a piano lesson at four." She jumped up off the floor and was in the courtyard before the rest of us got to our feet. We climbed up the vine and down the trellis with an urgency that could only be fueled by the need to flee an awkward situation. Once over the wall, Lynn ran down the street to her house. Debbie and Claire went in opposite directions to catch their respective buses.

I walked home alone thinking about what had just happened. I was sort of thinking about what Debbie actually said. Eric was black and Claire at least looked black. It just made sense. But I didn't see my situation as being similar. It never occurred to me that other people thought I should only date Mexican boys. I grew anxious about what the other kids would think. I wondered if Jeff's mother would be upset that he had kissed a Mexican girl?

My father used to always tell us that since we were Mexicans, we had to be a cut above if we were going to get any respect in this country.

"You need to be hardworking, honest and punctual. Impress people by holding your head high," he would say.

At that point in my life, I didn't want to be a cut above. I just wanted to be like everyone else.

My depression deepened as I rounded the corner to my street. For once I was glad we had to leave the house, so Lynn could get to her piano lesson. It then occurred to me that it was Monday. Lynn had her piano lessons on Tuesdays. Her brilliance never ceased to amaze me.

TEENAGEHOOD

My birthday was coming up, and I wanted to have a party. I could invite all my friends. I was going to be fourteen, and since I had officially socially matured, I would invite boys. Jeff and Peter for sure, and maybe Tim Hennessey. We could play records and have chips and soda. Lynn and the others could help me plan it. The first problem was going to be getting permission.

"I was thinking about having a few friends over for my birthday," I blurted out one day when I got home from school.

"That would be nice," my mother said. "You can invite two girls over for dinner."

"I was thinking more like a party."

My mother waved me away, "No parties."

"But I'm a teenager. Teenagers are supposed to go to parties."

"What kind of a party?"

"You know. Punch and chips and a few friends."

Silence.

"Maybe a couple of boys."

"Boys? You're too young to go to a party with boys."

"But, I wouldn't be going to the party. They'd come here. You and dad can chaperone."

"No!"

"But I'm going to be fourteen. Having a teenage party means you have to invite boys. It's a rite of passage."

"¿Qué es eso?"

"Rite of passage. It means... I don't know how to say it in Spanish!"

My mother just looked at me.

"Like a *quincenera*," I said as a way of explanation.

"That's not until next year," she said.

"But they don't do that in America. Here it's a Sweet 16."

"Bueno. Two years then."

Ugh! When was I going to learn to leave well enough alone? It was becoming more and more of a struggle to translate my American feelings in a way she could understand. Frustrated, I went to hide in my room. Why don't you just lock me in a convent? I fumed. Eddie got to go to a boy-girl party when he was fourteen. I couldn't believe life was so unfair. The thought of spending my fourteenth birthday listening to my *Tío Rodolfo* talking about his boyhood hunting rattlesnakes made me want to cry.

I moped around for a couple of days to let my mother see how depressed I was. If I couldn't have a boy-girl party, maybe I could have a slumber party? My moping must have worked because much to my surprise, my mother said I could.

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"How many friends can I invite?"
"Two."
"Two? That's not a slumber party!"
"How many do you want to invite?"
"Ten."
"Estas loca. Ten is too many."
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"But that's what a slumber party is!" I didn't really know that for a fact, since my mother never let me go to one. I'd been invited, lots of times, but a proper Mexican girl never sleeps away from under her father's roof until she's married.

"When abuelita came last summer, she brought Pilar for six weeks."

"That's different; she's your cousin. Family is different."

If this slumber party was going to happen at all, I needed to come up with a compromise.

"What if eight girls come over for cake and ice cream and four spend the night?"

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"Which four?"

"Alana, Lynn, Debbie, and Claire."

"Alana from across the street with the divorced mother?"

"Yeah."

"Estas loca."

"But..."

"¡No!"
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My mother's opinion of Alana was completely unfair. It wasn't her fault that her father was a cheating scumbag. But I knew it was hopeless, so I dropped it. "What about Lynn, Debbie, and Claire?" "Lynn and Debbie I know. They are nice girls. Who's Claire? I never heard of her before."

"Yes you have. She's the new girl. Remember you met her at 'Back to School' night."

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"¿La negrita?"
"Yeah."
"No."
"Why not?"
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"I won't have a black person spending the night in my home."

I had a feeling my mother would react that way, but I didn't actually think she'd say it. I knew lots of people who were prejudiced. Sometimes I'd hear my father talking to the neighbors, and they used the N-word all the time even though my brothers and I weren't allowed to. I didn't understand why my parents would treat people the way we, ourselves, were sometimes treated. Adults were such hypocrites. It made me think of the race riots in New Jersey that I saw on the news the year before. It wasn't just black and white people in America either. I heard about girls in Ireland who were tarred and feathered for dating British soldiers. I guessed people were the same all around the world. Everyone needed an excuse to hate someone else.

But after what happened at Afton's house last week, I couldn't not invite Claire. I wouldn't do that to her. I had to either think of something or forget the whole thing. For the next two days I tried to remember all those things that made my mother like some of my friends and not like others. She liked Debbie's mom because she was always so polite and friendly. She stayed home to keep house and raise children like a good Catholic, plus she would give my brothers and me rides home when it rained. My mother liked Lynn's mom because she always dressed nicely and didn't shout at her kids. She said Mrs. Whitley was *muy buena gente*.

I'd only met Claire's mom once, and she was dressed nicely and didn't shout. She didn't work either, so she got points for that. Claire had a baby sister that died a couple of hours after she was born. They didn't get a chance to baptize her, so she has to spend all eternity in baby limbo. I thought that might score some sympathy points, but I didn't feel right about using their tragedy for my benefit.

Even though Claire kept saying she wasn't black, her blackness was causing me a lot of distress. She kept saying she was Cuban. How could I

tell her that my mother wouldn't let her spend the night because she looked black? That's when I realized that she was Cuban. Her mother spoke Spanish just like my mother. That was the angle I needed to use. But I had to wait until my mother was in a good mood. That was a small window of opportunity. The best time would be after her soap opera was over.

"I'm going to make the invitations for my slumber party and give them out tomorrow," I said the minute she turned the television over to my brothers.

"Bueno. Remember only eight for cake and ice cream and three can spend the night."

"Did I tell you that Claire is Cuban?"

"Who is Cuban?"

"Claire! I told you about her. She's the new girl you won't let me invite her over because you don't like dark people."

"I never said I didn't like dark people."

"Then why are you always mad at me when I get a tan?"

She changed the subject.

"¿Es Cubana?"

"Yeah. Her parents immigrated when she was three. Her father's a doctor, and her mother speaks Spanish and everything. *Son muy buena gente*." I waited a moment for it to sink in. "We have a lot in common. I now understand what you mean about me spending more time with people of my own culture. Sometimes Claire and I speak Spanish to each other, but she has a funny accent.

"If you let me invite her to spend the night, you can meet her mother and maybe you can be friends."

She didn't respond for a few minutes. Finally she said, "Let me ask your father."

Yes! I knew that when she said she needed to ask my father, she was changing her mind and blaming him. My party was a go!

That Saturday my friends arrived for my fourteenth birthday party with presents and lots of gossip. Besides Lynn, Claire, and Debbie, who came in and discreetly hid their sleeping bags and pillows in my room, five other girls from school were invited. Blythe James, Suzette Palmer, and Helen Joyce had been in girl scouts with Debbie since first grade. Charlotte Brun moved here from Ohio three years ago because her dad got a high paying accounting job. He worked for the same law firm as Lynn's dad. Renée

Moretti enrolled at Saint Benedict's last year because her parents didn't think the public junior high was very safe.

I set up my record player in the living room and kicked Diego and Manny out so we could have some peace. Eddie had arranged to spend the night with Lance Kirkland up the street.

"Put on a record," Renée said. "What have you got?"

"How about Elton John?" We all got up and sang along pretending to hold microphones in our hands. With the stereo blaring we took turns throwing M&Ms in the air and trying to catch them in our mouths.

"Do you have any Led Zeppelin?" asked Suzette as she flipped through my stack of LPs.

"No, but I've got *Plastic Ono Band*," I said.

"Did you guys hear that the government is trying to deport John Lennon?" Helen said.

"You're kidding! Why?" I asked.

"Oh! I know," said Lynn. "He got arrested for smoking pot a few years ago, and President Nixon doesn't like him because he supported George McGovern for president."

"What are they going to do, deport everyone who smokes pot and likes McGovern?" Suzette said. Suzette's parents were the coolest ever. Her dad had long hair and a beard, and her mom wore bell bottoms and moccasins. She would have gone to the public school except her grandmother insisted she go to Saint Benedict's and was paying the tuition. "My dad said that fifteen percent of all Americans smoke pot. If John Lennon gets sent home, there're going to be all sorts of protests."

"Where would they send him?" asked Renée. We thought she was joking, so we laughed until we realized she was serious.

"Where is everyone going to high school?" Lynn asked to change the subject.

"Helen and I are going to Madison High School with Debbie and Claire," said Blythe. "It's going to be so nice to not have to wear a uniform."

"Yeah," added Helen. "I can't wait to go school shopping this summer. I'm going to get a whole new wardrobe. Boots and mini-skirts."

"Where are you going to go to high school next year?" Suzette asked Lynn.

"I'm going to Bishop Thomas. I'll still have a brother and a sister who go there even though my older brother is graduating in June."

"Is he the one who drove you here?" asked Charlotte.

"Yeah."

"He's such a fox! What's his name?"

"Michael."

"Does he have a girlfriend?"

"Usually."

Blythe bounced an M&M off her forehead. "He's going to be in college next year, and you'll just be a high school freshman. Give it up."

Charlotte pursed her lips. "Your other brother's a sophomore, right? What's he look like?" she asked Lynn.

"Ty? Just like Michael. There's a strong family resemblance between all my brothers and sisters. But he has a long-time girlfriend."

"An obstacle, not a barrier."

"Jeez, Charlotte," said Lynn. The rest of us laughed. Charlotte had a reputation for being boy crazy. Mostly it was because she developed early. She started wearing a bra in the fifth grade, and her mother let her wear lipstick to school.

"I know what you're thinking, but I'm still a virgin," Charlotte said. "But did you know that Sharon Hanson lost her virginity in the seventh grade?"

Helen sat up. "The boy she did it with lives down the street from me." We all gave her our attention. "He says they did it in his bedroom while his parents were still at work."

"Shhhh, keep your voices down. I don't want my mother to hear this conversation," I said as I looked over my shoulder to make sure the door was closed.

"Boys lie you know," Blythe whispered. "How do you know he didn't make it up just to impress his friends?"

"He's not the only one who's bragged about it."

"That's why she has the reputation she has," said Renée.

"Yeah, Renée's right. None of the rest of us have a reputation like that."

"Except for Charlotte," said Renée.

Charlotte feigned offence and threw a handful of M&Ms at her. We all laughed and dove after the M&Ms.

My mother made me turn the record player down half a dozen times before it was time for Renée, Charlotte, and the others to go home.

"Thank you for coming and thanks for the present," I said to each as they walked out the door. I was thrilled to have received my first eight-track cassettes of my favorite groups even though I didn't own an eight-track player.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Debbie after they all left.

"Let's see what's on television. Maybe we can find a scary movie." I turned on our television. I was a bit embarrassed that we didn't have a color set. I know each of my friends did. They also had remote controls. I made it a point to sit near the television, so I could change the channels without getting up.

"Look, look," shouted Lynn. Channel nine was advertising its Saturday night programming. "*Rosemary's Baby* is on tonight."

"When's it starting?"

"Tonight at ten. That's in thirty minutes." We cheered and selected our spots on the floor in front of the television. Just as we made ourselves comfortable in our sleeping bags, we heard heavy footsteps and angry voices through the ceiling. *Just what I was afraid of*, I thought.

"What's that?" asked Lynn.

"It's the people upstairs, Chiara and Donald," I said. "They can get pretty loud sometimes. It will stop in a few minutes." I crossed my fingers. Again I felt embarrassed and was glad the other girls had gone home. I hated apartment living.

At ten o'clock, my mother came in with a large bowl of popcorn and told us we needed to keep the volume low because the rest of the family was going to bed.

"Okay, good night."

"Good night, Mrs. Marquez."

"Buenas noches."

The noise upstairs died down and the movie started.

"Mia Farrow is so pretty," said Debbie.

"She's too skinny."

"Not as skinny as Twiggy."

It didn't take us long before we were riveted to the television. We were all transfixed as Rosemary walked up to the cradle. She pulled back the black drapery, and her eyes got wide with horror. At that moment, a loud

bang rattled the living room window. A collective scream filled the air along with what was left of the popcorn.

"There's someone outside," I shouted, the movie forgotten. My father came running out of the bedroom tying his bathrobe and fumbling with his glasses.

"What's wrong?" We didn't have to answer. The window rattled again as someone or something banged even harder. This time we heard voices along with rapid movement outside.

"¡Ay por Dios!" My father angrily headed for the front door.

"No! Don't open it," I pleaded. Debbie had crawled into her sleeping bag and zipped it up over her head. Claire and Lynn were standing on the couch with their arms around each other.

My father opened the door. "Eddie!" he shouted into the dark. "Come here. Get inside." This time we could hear boyish laughter, but Eddie didn't materialize. "Vas a ver," my father threatened as he shouted into the dark once more. "And Lance, I'll be speaking with your mother in the morning."

Claire and Lynn jumped off the couch and ran to the window. I was incensed.

"He better get grounded," I said to my father as he walked down the hall back to his room. I think my father was more angry at having to get out of bed than at Eddie and Lance's prank.

"It was just Eddie and Lance Kirkland trying to be funny." I poked the lumpy sleeping bag with my toe. "You can come out now, Debbie."

"Is he gone?" she asked.

"For now," I said. "Do you want to keep watching the movie?"



"Yeah," Lynn said. "We'll get your brother back later."

Sister Frances Joseph opened the windows before she started her history lesson on prohibition. A breeze laden with the magic of spring fanned our impassive faces. The anticipation that summer was fast approaching made us all immune to scholastic enthusiasm. With my chin resting on my hand, my eyes gazed at the trees surrounding Afton's house. Sister's voice faded as my mind floated deep into my daydream.

I pictured Jeff and me holding hands as we walked through the park. He'd push me on the swing as my flowery chiffon dress accentuated my firm breasts and narrow waist. He'd buy me an ice cream cone and walk me home. We'd spend hours on the phone talking about nothing. That summer was going to be the best. I remember wishing that summer lasted as long as the other seasons.

Saturday morning, my brothers and I gathered our assorted fliers that had been handed out at school and bombarded my father with requests for our forthcoming summer activities.

"The recreation center is holding little league sign-ups on Saturday," Manny told my father as he placed the flier on top of the newspaper he was reading. "Will you take me?"

"Me, too," shouted Diego, momentarily distracted from his Saturday morning cartoons.

"I'm going to get a job as soon as school's out," Eddie interrupted. "I've already got three job applications. How do I get a social security number?"

"Can I take swim lessons again this summer?" I asked. "It only costs five dollars at the city pool."

"I already sent a letter to your *abuelita* in Mexico telling her we were coming to visit in July," my mother said pulling rank over all our requests.

"No!" Eddie, Manny, and I shouted. "Mexico is boring. We want to stay here."

"Let's wait until Easter is over before making any plans," my father said, trying to get back to his newspaper.



The garden of Afton's house reflected my ride through time. The trees and bushes were budding new leaves. The bulb plants were throwing up slender green arms as if to say, "Here we are!" The days grew longer and so did our visits. We never saw the boys again, although a vaguely familiar scent, skunky, yet not offensive, often greeted us on the veranda. We assumed that the boys lost interest in the house. The four of us, however, had all but moved in. Lynn brought a screwdriver and a pair of pliers she snuck out of her father's toolbox several weeks ago. We pried the nails out of a window in the parlor. Getting in the house now was much easier. We simply walked across the veranda, opened the window, and stepped in.

Claire brought an old transistor radio her brother had discarded. We kept it hidden in the corner of the sunroom. Debbie and I brought cleaning supplies so we wouldn't have to sit on the dusty floor. We had decided to keep some snacks in a shoe box next to the radio, but on a subsequent visit we realized some sort of rodent liked Ding Dongs and Cheetos as much as we did.

"We shouldn't be eating that stuff anyway. My mom says that's why my face breaks out," said Debbie.

"That's a myth. Chocolate doesn't give you acne. It's just part of being a teenager," responded Lynn.

"Speaking about becoming a teenager, my mom is taking me to buy a new bra. She says I'm ready for a B cup." Debbie stood up straight and pushed her shoulders back to accentuate her growing bosoms.

Our conversations matured along with our bodies.

"Do you guys believe in Heaven and Hell?" I asked.

"You've got to believe in Heaven if you believe in God, and if you don't believe in God, you're going to Hell," said Claire.

"What if there isn't any God?" I pondered.

"Then what would happen after you die?"

"You're just dead. Your body rots and the worms eat it."

"No, it turns into dust. Ashes to ashes and dust to dust," said Lynn.

"That's disgusting," said Debbie. "Your soul goes to Heaven. It's in the Bible."

"But, see, that's my point. What if you just stop living? Your soul is in your mind, and it just stops because there is no Heaven or Hell."

"Do you want to tell Tim Hennessey that his brother is just rotting in his grave instead of being in Heaven with God?"

"No, but..."

"You're committing blasphemy if you don't believe in God. Then you're going to Hell for sure. You better go to confession and do penance for questioning the existence of God," Debbie warned me.

"What? I can't even ask questions?"

"My sister wants to get rid of her bean bag chair," Lynn interrupted to change the subject. "During Easter vacation, let's bring it over here."

"How are we going to get it over the wall?"

"It's a beanbag chair. It doesn't weigh anything. We'll just toss it over."

"I'm going to bring my old magazines," I said.

"Me, too," said Debbie.

"I've got a bunch of *Tiger Beat*, *Teen*, and *Seventeen*. What do you have?"

"I've got *Glamour* and *Cosmo*. They're really my sister's, but she has so many she won't notice if I take some."

"What about putting up some posters?" Lynn asked.

"Yeah! I've got one of David Cassidy and one of Michael Jackson. My mom won't let me put them up in my room," said Claire.

"My sister just took down her pictures of the Beatles that came with their White Album. I bet she'd give them to me," Lynn added.

"Why is your sister getting rid of all her stuff? Is she redecorating?"

"Yeah, she's moving into Michael's old room as soon as he goes away to college."

"I wish we had electricity. We could bring a record player," Debbie said.

"Oh, yeah! Wouldn't it be cool to have a party here?" I said.

"Yeah, I could dig it!" Claire said as she did a smooth salsa move.

"Are you guys insane? We can't have anyone over here. They'd be coming over all the time and ruining the place." Lynn warned.

"Yeah, you're right," admitted Claire.

"But what about just inviting Jeff and Peter? We could play Spin the Bottle," I suggested.

"You're just looking for an excuse to make out with Jeff again."

"No, I'm not!" Okay, maybe I was.

When it was time to go home, I had to cut through the schoolyard. At the far end was the usual group of boys playing basketball after school. Wrapped up in my thoughts, I didn't notice the boy approaching until he was by my side.

"Hi, Letty."

"Jeff!"

"What are you doing here so late?"

"I was at Lynn's house," I lied. "We were studying for the math test on Monday."

"Maybe you and me could study together sometime."

My heart stopped beating, and I forgot how to breathe. Before I passed out, Jeff ran off.

"See ya later," he shouted over his shoulder as he headed back to the basketball court.

I couldn't believe what was happening to me. A nice boy liked me. The thought of having a boyfriend made me giddy. Jeff and I really were going to have a summer romance.

"Mrs. Letty Hanover," I said out loud. Life was wonderful.

WHITE FLIGHT

"Hey batter, batter. Hey batter, batter. Swing!"

We were at Lynn's first softball game since she got her cast off. Her coach only let her pitch for one inning because he didn't want her to overexert her arm. Still, she struck out the first two batters. Her parents were on the bleachers with several of her brothers and sisters. Each one was in some sort of uniform whether it was Little League or Bobby Sox. I said hello to her mom and dad and then went to sit with some of the kids from school.

"Lynn breaking her arm could cost them missing the play-offs," said the boy next to me. "Yeah, they are several games behind."

"Well, she's their star player, and she's back. So nothing to worry about," I said to no one in particular. I watched Lynn with a bit of envy. I always wanted to play a sport, but my mom wouldn't let me. I knew I could probably be fairly good at one since I was usually one of the first few picked for sides during gym class. But mostly I just wanted to hang out with the team at the pizza place after the games.

Debbie and Claire showed up together and squeezed in next to me.

"What's the score?" asked Claire.

"Six to three. Lynn pitched last inning, and she just walked to first."

"Oh, I see her," Debbie said as she waved to Lynn.

"Don't bother," I said. "Lynn gets so wrapped up in her games, she'll never notice you."

"Too bad softball isn't an Olympic sport," Debbie sighed. "She'd be on her way to Munich this summer for sure."

"Wouldn't that be the coolest thing ever?" I imagined myself on the winner's podium waving to the crowd as I held up my gold medal for all to see. The announcer would remark on how young I was to have broken the world's record in... in... Wait, I needed a sport.

"Letty, let's go to the snack bar," Claire said as she and Debbie scooted their way down the bleachers. I followed them, but I didn't have any money. "I gotta go, you guys. I have to get back over to the field where my brother is playing," I said as they got in line.

"No! Why?"

"His game is almost over, and my dad said he didn't want to have to wait on me. He has to go to work tonight. Besides, I'm freezing."

After dinner that night, I curled up on the couch under a blanket to watch T.V. Chiara and Donald from upstairs were having another fight. Their yelling could be heard through the ceiling as my brothers and I were watching *All in the Family*. Their fights occurred on a regular basis, usually after an evening of drinking. My brothers and I often saw them on their balcony with beer before dinner. Chiara's accent always got thicker when she had a beer in her hand.

"Buona sera, bambini! Are you staying out of trouble?"

My mother never wasted these opportunities to show us the evils of alcohol.

"¿Ya ves?" she would ask. "This is what drinking does to people. I'm surprised none of the other tenants are complaining." These generalizations always irritated me. When *Tío Rodolfo* and *Tía Panchita* came over for dinner they often had a *cerveza* and no one started screaming and fighting. Why did my mother always have to be so critical of other people's behavior? Why couldn't she see people for what they were inside?

Before I could go on with my adolescent ill mood my thoughts were interrupted by a scream that made my mother jump off the couch and made us kids run to the window.

"¡Por Dios!" She grabbed each of us by the collar to repel us back into the living room and then ran to the front door and turned the deadbolt. Again the scream, but this time we could tell it was Donald. We could hear him in the driveway yelling for someone to call the police.

"She's got a knife! She's trying to kill me!"

Yep. Chiara was drinking again. Curiosity got the best of my mother, and soon all five of us were at the window watching Donald in his underwear knocking on the Geraldi's door. The police arrived within minutes, and the street filled with neighborhood kids and their parents to see Chiara being handcuffed and put in the patrol car. I couldn't believe how a woman who was as nice as she was could become so violent. *Tía Panchita* never pulled a knife on *Tío Rodolfo* after a beer, although sometimes I think my mother wanted to, and she didn't even drink. After the commotion was over, Eddie,

Manny, and I took bets on how long she would be in prison. I said she would get at least ten years for attempted murder, but Eddie said I was crazy.

"All she has to do is claim that Donald tried to rape her. That way she can claim self-defense." I had newfound respect for Eddie's brilliance when she came home the next morning. But after a few days, I realized that nothing had changed. She hadn't kicked Donald out. Why would a woman who almost got raped still want to live in the same apartment with the man who tried to rape her? The other neighbors were of the opinion that Donald should leave *her*. Everyone said she was the crazy one.

"That's what you get when you hook-up with a woman who's willing to live in sin," was the general consensus.

"He could do much better."

We were all surprised when they moved out together.



"The landlord kicked her out," I heard Mrs. Geraldi tell my mother. "He could have stayed, but he's moving with her. He must really love that woman." I knew what my mother was thinking, if he loved her so much, then why didn't he marry her?

"Estas loco," my mother told my dad. They were having a major conversation, the kind that wasn't supposed to include the kids, but I kept one ear on them and the other on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. My mother had had it with apartment living. "Borrachos... ladrones... bombas... policía." Drunks, thieves, bombs, police were words spoken with heightened emotion on my mother's part. My father just nodded after giving up trying to participate in the discussion. My father was really good at making you think he was listening when he wasn't. He had good eye contact and body language, but his hands gave him away. He would scratch his thumbnail with this ring finger when he was biding his time until he could get to the sports page. I'm sure he was thinking that if he showed more interest in what she was saying, the sooner he could find out if the baseball players' strike had gotten anywhere.

The baseball strike ended mid-April, but my mother's tirade against apartment living did not. After dinner one Saturday, my father said that he

had an announcement.

"We're moving," he said. I remember having lived in other apartments before we ended up here, so the news wasn't as exciting to me as it was to Diego who couldn't remember having lived anywhere else.

"Are we moving to the Royal Palms? It has a pool." Manny said.

"No. We're moving out of town. To a place called Sol Vista."

"We're moving to Mexico?" I screamed knocking over the chair as I jumped up.

"No. No, Sol Vista is a planned community. We bought a house, mi'ja."

"What? A house? Where is Sol Vista? I've never heard of it."

"It's about thirty miles south of here."

"Thirty miles! How will I get to school?"

"You'll walk."

"Thirty miles!"

"¡Ay Dios mío!" My father threw up his hands. "They have schools there. We're going to wait until you kids get out of school for the summer. In the fall, you and Eddie will go to the new high school."

I was speechless.

"Didn't you hear me say that we bought a house? We're finally going to live in a house with a yard. Aren't you excited? No neighbors upstairs and our own private driveway and backyard."

I couldn't believe what he was saying. I was still trying to register the fact that I wasn't going to Catholic Girls' High. But what about my friends? What about Jeff? Thirty miles was on the dark side of the moon to a girl who was still two years away from getting her driver's license! Oh, my God! What about Afton's house?

"No! I'm not moving." I knew the minute I said it that it didn't make any difference. I was moving. And I wasn't just moving out of this apartment, I was moving out of my life. I went to my room and launched myself onto my bed. Life was no longer worth living. High school was only five months away. I was finally getting out of elementary school and going to high school, something I had been looking forward to all year. But now I was going to be the new girl. What was a planned community anyway? It sounded like the communism we learned about last year. Were all the houses painted the same color? Were we going to have to wear Mao suits? I put Carole King's album on the record player. When the piano started

playing my mind quickly jumped to the question, does anyone stay in one place anymore? My stomach started hurting, but the tears never came.

I wanted to call Lynn, Debbie, and Claire to tell them the awful news, but the phone was in the kitchen, and I didn't want my whole family listening to my conversation. It almost killed me to have to wait until nine o'clock the next morning when I knew they'd be up getting ready to go to church with their families.

"We have to meet at the house this afternoon," I said into the receiver the second Lynn picked up the phone. It was a mandate rather than a proposal. Claire couldn't go because it was her brother's birthday and she had to hang around, but Debbie and Lynn agreed to meet me after church at one o'clock. I didn't ask permission. I just left.

I arrived before the other two, so I sat between the roots of one of the sycamore trees to contemplate my miserable life. With my back resting against the trunk and my arms resting on the roots that rose nearly shoulder high, I looked up to the sky. Cloudless blue played hide-and-seek with the leaves annoyed by a feeble breeze. I couldn't see the smog that I knew was there, and I couldn't see God that may or may not have been there.

Lynn arrived and plopped herself down next to me, throwing her knees over my root. Her blonde hair was in a ponytail that made her freckles more noticeable than her brilliant blue eyes. A frown seemed out of place on her pretty face.

"You'll never guess," she stated as she crossed her arms in front of her.

"Your mom's got another bun in the oven," I guessed.

"Nope."

"Your dad got arrested for pushing heroin?" Before she could answer, Debbie showed up with Wilt, her Cocker Spaniel. Her brothers named him Wilt Chamberlain after the basketball player.

"How did you get him over the wall?" Lynn and I both asked.

"It wasn't easy. What's up?"

"You'll never guess," Lynn said again.

"Her mom's not pregnant, and her dad didn't get arrested for pushing heroin," I offered.

"We're moving." Debbie and I both looked at her in amazement. "My parents are looking to buy a new house with five bedrooms, so I'll only have to share a room with my two little sisters. They just told us when we

got home from church. It's in a place called Cedar Shoals. It's a planned community."

"What's that mean?" I threw up my hands. "All of a sudden everyone is moving to a 'planned community."

"I don't know, but we're moving this summer. Right after school's out." Lynn looked across at her feet. Wilt jumped on her to get her to play, but she just pushed him away. "My mom says I'll like it because all the houses are brand new and so is the school."

"I'm moving, too," I blurted out. They both looked at me.

"What?"

"Nah-uh!"

"My parents already bought a house in a place called Sol Vista. It's also a planned community thirty miles south of here. My mom said that she doesn't want to raise kids in a place full of crazy people."

"That's what my parents said. They want to move somewhere where there aren't so many minorities."

I stared at Lynn a bit confused for a second.

"Excuse me?" At first I wasn't sure I heard her right. "What do you think I am?" I asked.

"You're different," she started back peddling like crazy. "You're one of us," she offered.

"But I'm still a minority. Don't your parents like me?" I got up, both hurt and offended.

Lynn jumped up to plead her case. "They didn't mean you specifically. They mean other Mexicans and Cubans and Puerto Ricans and stuff."

"What about me?" Debbie shouted. "I'm not going to have any friends left."

"You'll have Claire."

"But she's black."

My disbelief shifted to Debbie. This conversation was getting worse and worse. I couldn't believe what was happening right before my eyes. What were we turning into? We were becoming the establishment. We were becoming all those things we were supposed to be fighting against. Did Lynn and Debbie really see Claire differently? Did they see me differently? Was our friendship a mockery? Tears welled in my eyes.

Wilt ran off after a squirrel, and Debbie took off after him. Lynn followed. Good. I didn't want to be with them. They made me angry, and I

wanted to get away. I ran until I was behind the house where I knew they couldn't see me. With my back leaning against the outside of the sunroom, I slid down and sat right in the dirt, and I held my head in my hands. Why was this happening? My stomach was starting to hurt again, and my hands were going numb. I looked up and saw the trellis. I knew what I had to do. I had to get inside the house. Someplace safe and comforting.

Although I could get in through the window, I didn't want the other two to see me in case they were still around. So I climbed the trellis to the cone roof and slid down the vine into the courtyard. Once in the parlor, I closed the door behind me. I stood looking through the windows to the outside, seeing the world through its eyes. It occurred to me that I had never been alone inside the house before. I should have been scared, but I wasn't. Turning toward the entry hall, I walked up to the staircase and sat on the first step. My shoulders started to shake, and a sob rose up from my heart into my throat. I cried. I cried because we were moving. I cried because Claire and I were minorities and people uprooted their entire families to get away from us. I cried because Jeff liked me, and I wasn't going to CGA. I cried because the world sucked, and I caught myself asking God to fix it all. I wasn't even sure there was a God. My whole life was turning out to be sham.

I don't know how long I sat there, head resting on my folded forearms, but the crying made me feel a little better. After a while I started counting the teardrops accumulating on the mahogany floor between my feet. Three, four, shut the door, five six, pick up sticks, seven, eight, lay them straight. I felt completely alone—not because I was in the house by myself—but because the friends I thought I knew didn't exist. Maybe it was better that I move away. Afton's house would always be here. Once I got my driver's license, I could always come and visit. Looking through the windows to the courtyard, I remembered the time we pretended to have a picnic like in *Little Women*. I sighed and started quietly singing the words to "Yesterday."

I wallowed in self-pity for another twenty minutes before thinking that I had better go. I didn't know if Lynn and Debbie were still out there somewhere, and I really didn't want to talk to either of them. But once over the wall, I had to walk through the alley behind Lynn's cul-de-sac to get home. They were both on the corner looking for me.

"Where did you go?" they asked.

"I wanted to be alone."

"I'm sorry for what I said." Debbie was sincerely contrite. "I don't know why I said it. I didn't mean it."

"People say things they don't mean all the time," Lynn said.

"How do you feel about being friends with a person that families move away from?" I asked them both.

"But you're the one that's moving."

Was that why my family was moving? Was I guilty of what I was accusing them of?

"I love you and Claire. You're my best friends," Debbie continued. "I was just shocked that both you and Lynn are moving away. Claire is new, but you two have been my friends for years. Please don't tell Claire what I said. She'll never understand."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"I know." She looked at her feet silently for a few seconds. "Can't we just forget it? Let's pretend it never happened. Let's still be friends. Okay?" Just ignore the pain and keep going. That's all I knew to do.

BUSTED!

Monday morning was warm, so I left my sweater at home and walked to school as usual. Knowing that I would be moving away this summer made me more keenly aware of my neighborhood. Some streets had large houses with neat front lawns. I remembered when I was much younger picking a rose in front of the yellow house on the corner. Further down the street was a hedge where Eddie and his friends would hide and wait to jump out and scare me as I passed by. Other streets were a mixture of small houses and apartment buildings. On the corner of Sparrow and Nightingale Drive, Manny, Diego, and I would sometimes meet up with some of the other kids and walk to school in the mornings. In some places the sidewalk would abruptly stop, forcing us to walk in the dirt. The boys would pick up little rocks or dirt clods and throw them at the stop sign, another foray of male competitiveness. There was no discernable pattern or logic to the layout of the streets that I could tell. They twisted and turned, grew wide then narrow, and an occasional grocery mart or Laundromat took up a corner. Apparently I lived in an unplanned community, and I was starting to accept the fact that I would be leaving it all behind.

When I got to school I noticed a gloomy group of seventh grade girls congregating on the church steps.

"What's going on?" I asked no one in particular, and then quickly noticed that they were all wearing black armbands. "What happened? Did someone die?"

"It's the second anniversary of the Beatles' break up," snapped a petite redhead.

"Oh, jeez. Are you serious? This is what you're upset about?"

"You're obviously not a fan or you would have known," declared a chubby brunette.

I couldn't believe what some young girls thought was important. They just didn't understand the problems of living in the real world.

Continuing on my way through the schoolyard, I spotted my three friends sitting in our spot under the bottlebrush tree. I went over to join them, still

shaking my head. Claire looked morose. "Debbie and Lynn just told me that you're moving."

I remembered that I hadn't yet told Claire about the move. "Yeah, my parents told me on Saturday. That's why I wanted to meet you guys yesterday. To tell you." Claire looked so sad. "But we're not leaving until July first. That's when we close escrow."

"What's that?"

"I don't know, but my parents have to close it before they can have the key."

"I'll never see you guys again," Claire cried. I gave Debbie and Lynn a sideways glance.

"We can always write to each other," I said.

"That's what my friends said when we moved here from Florida. You'll write for a few weeks and then stop when you make new friends."

"That's not going to happen with us. We'll work something out," Lynn promised. I could tell she already had a plan. "My dad isn't moving away from his job. He said that during the summer I can ride in with him and hang out with you guys, and then he'll pick me up when he gets off work. Letty's dad can do the same thing."

"My dad works nights," I reminded them. That's when I saw Wanda heading toward us. Instead of her usual know-it-all self, her attitude today seemed vengeful.

She stopped directly in front of Lynn with her fists on her hips, "My cousin, Corbin, is friends with your little brother, Alex," she said.

"Cool, man," Lynn responded sarcastically. "Maybe they should have a tea party."

"Your brother showed him how to get into the big yard of the abandoned house that's across the street. He said they went there the other day to climb the trees." She had our attention. "He said that you climb a wall and walk through some bushes. I'm going with him after school today. See. I wore my tennis shoes." We looked at her hopelessly. "Got anything to say about it?" We didn't respond. "I thought so." She walked away as if she'd just scored a knockout in the first round.

The four of us looked at each other, baffled. We got into a huddle.

"What was that all about?"

"Beats me."

"What should we do?"

Debbie looked worried. "We need to get there before she does and make sure she doesn't notice the trellis and figure out how to get in."

"It took us two months to figure out how to get in. She's not going to do it in one afternoon," Lynn said.

"Yeah, but we've got to be there if she's going to be there." Claire wasn't taking any chances.

"As soon as the bell rings, let's at least run over and hide in the bushes to watch what she does," I suggested.

"What if she tells other people?"

"Maybe we should take her over there ourselves and convince her that it's no big deal, just an old house."

"She's too smart for that. She'll think we're up to something. Maybe it would be better if she just went and saw for herself. If it's just her and her little cousin, she won't think it's very exciting and she'll lose interest." We were at a loss as to the best strategy to keep Wanda at bay.

After school we took off running for the wall and got to the garden as fast as we could. There was a thicket at the far end behind one of the sycamore trees. That's where we hid and waited. It didn't take Wanda and Corbin long to get there. We saw her emerge with her gap-toothed cousin from the pathway through the bushes.

She seemed surprised by the size of the house as she walked around it, ignoring Corbin's urging to climb the trees. Stopping in front, she shielded her eyes from the sun and looked to the second and third floors. Cautiously, she walked up the front steps, looking about for anyone that might stop her. As I anticipated, she tried the knob on the front door and then peered through the windows.

"She doesn't look too interested," Debbie said, though it seemed more like wishful thinking than an actual fact of observation.

Corbin definitely wasn't much interested in the house and was already sitting on a branch of a sycamore tree.

"Wanda, come climb this tree. I bet I can climb higher than you," he dared her.

Wanda jogged over to the tree where Corbin was straddling a limb.

"Good, she's lost interest," I whispered to Lynn who was crouched next to me.

Up the tree she went, more skillful and agile than I wanted to admit. She reached a much higher branch than her cousin before stopping. They both sat

on their respective limbs for a while, and I could tell that they were engaged in conversation.

"What are they saying?" Lynn whispered.

"I don't know, but I hope they don't take all day. My legs are falling asleep." I tried to readjust my crouching position, but the dead leaves loudly betrayed my every move.

A few more minutes passed before Wanda and Corbin climbed down. Walking over to the house, they stopped on the pebbly pathway that surrounded it. Bending down, each grabbed a handful of small rocks. They walked closer to the house, and as they reached back with their arms, it was clear that they intended to break the windows.

"Stop!" We all shouted at once revealing ourselves. "Don't do it."

Startled, Corbin dropped the rocks and took off. Wanda started to run, but hesitated and turned to see who had been watching them. She stopped when she saw us.

"You were spying on me?" she said with indignation as she crossed her arms in front of her. "I don't see what all the fuss is about," she continued as we approached. "This is just an old house and not a very pretty one. The paint's peeling, and a couple of shutters are missing."

"Yeah, you're right. It's nothing special." We all agreed.

"Then why keep it such a big secret?"

"No reason, just because."

"Can you get inside?"

"No. Everything is locked or nailed shut," Debbie said.

"Believe us, we've tried," Claire added for emphasis.

Wanda wore a dubious expression. "If we broke the windows, we could probably get in."

"Yeah!" Shouted Corbin who had rejoined us.

"No!" All four of us shouted at the same time.

"Why not? What's the big deal?"

"The hospital is just on the other side of those bushes," Lynn said pointing west. "The security guard might hear," she cautioned.

"Who cares? We'll just run away. He won't know who we are."

"He'll know we go to Saint Benedict's because of our uniforms."

Our uniforms were finally good for something.

"In fact," Lynn went on, "He makes his rounds at three o'clock every day. He'll be here any minute."

"Yeah." The rest of us joined in on Lynn's lie. "We'd better go."

We started walking away hoping Wanda would follow. She looked in the direction of the hospital, then back at us. I could tell she wasn't sure she believed us, but followed nevertheless.

Corbin ran out ahead to pester a defiant squirrel while Wanda dragged her feet behind us. I tried to keep her in my peripheral vision. I assumed she was just taking it all in until she made a dash toward an old flower bed next to the kitchen steps. There she picked up a couple of good size rocks and then ran in the opposite direction. She stopped, leaned back, and pitched one of them toward the house. The rock hit a window on the second floor of the turret. The shattering of glass reverberated through to my marrow. Claire, being closest, wasted no time in tackling her to the ground before she could do any more damage. Debbie, Lynn, and I joined the fray as soon as we could, but Wanda was already scratching Claire with her left hand, the right still holding on to a rock.

Debbie grabbed Wanda's left arm trying to hold it back, but Corbin jumped on her and brought her down. I tried to grab Wanda's other hand, but she was flailing it about so wildly I couldn't get a firm hold. I saw Lynn trying to pull Corbin off of Debbie when I suddenly felt a sharp pain on my forehead. For a moment I was dazed, and then realized that Wanda had struck me with the rock. She used that opportunity to get loose. Grabbing Corbin around his waist, she pulled him away from Lynn, who was failing to dodge his angry kicks to her shins.

When she was beyond striking distance, Wanda stopped and shouted, "You guys are in so much trouble. I'm calling the police and having you all arrested for assault and battery." She angrily headed back toward the wall dragging Corbin along with her. Turning, she flipped us off before disappearing into the bushes.

"Are you insane?" shouted Lynn. "Your freakish little cousin attacked *me*!"

By then, they were out of earshot.

"Letty! You're bleeding," Claire said motioning toward the spot on my forehead.

"And your arms are all scratched up," I pointed out as I lightly touched my forehead and felt the blood. Debbie was brushing dirt and gravel off of her knees and elbows, and Lynn was nursing her injured shins. We were all wounded to one degree or another.

"Do you think she'll really call the police?"

"If she does, she's stupider than I thought. She was the one that broke the window. She should thank us for stopping her from committing any more criminal vandal-ism," Lynn said.

"What's that?" asked Claire.

"I don't know, but I'm sure it's something bad. I heard it on *Columbo* the other night. I'll ask my dad about it when he gets home."

"If I go home looking like this I'm going to be in a lot of trouble. Am I still bleeding?" I asked Debbie.

"No, but you're growing a bump on your forehead."

"Crap! I'm in so much trouble!"

"Why would you be in trouble for getting hurt?"

"You know my mother. She'll be mad at me for not being ladylike. She says only boys get hurt. If she finds out that I've been in a fight, she'll send me to Mexico to live with my grandmother."

"Tell her you fell off your bike."

"I didn't ride my bike to school," I said as I started to bend down to wipe the blood off my fingers on the grass, but a tremendous headache stopped me.

"You guys better come over to my house to clean up before you go home," Lynn offered. Luckily no one saw us come in, so we were able to avoid an inquisition by her mother. I wasn't so lucky when I got to my house. I only managed to hide the bump until dinner.

"Get your hair out of your eyes," my mother said for the millionth time in my life. I moved my bangs a bit to the side.

"Can I have some more milk?" Diego asked. My mother got up to get Diego's milk. As she walked past me, she brushed my bangs out of my eyes herself.

"Ouch!"

"Don't be so scandalous," she said. Then she took a better look at me. ¿Qué te pasó?" she demanded.

"I fell down the church steps," I had prepared a story. "I went to confession before school this morning to ask forgiveness for being lazy and disrespectful. Monsignor Mullins said that my penance was to say one 'Our Father' and five 'Hail Marys.'" She shot me a skeptical eye. "I had to perform my act of contrition while I was walking out of the church because I didn't want to be late for school. You know how you always pray with your eyes closed? Well, I forgot about the steps outside the church and I fell down

right in front of Mrs. O'Grady's entire class. All the kids laughed at me. It was really embarrassing."

"Tonta," she said. My mother didn't believe in being comforting. "Be more careful. Let me put some lemon juice on that so that it doesn't leave a scar."



That was a close call, I said to myself, but I had no idea what was in store.

Sister Frances Joseph was in the middle of talking about the Great Depressio and FDR. "Relief, recovery, and reform were the general aims of the New Deal," she listed them on her fingers. "Roosevelt's power as president was greatly increased so that he and Congress could create programs to put peopl back to work..."

I could hear the steady clip-clap of heals against the linoleum echoing in th hallway. The sound got louder and then abruptly stopped.

"Excuse me, Sister Frances Joseph." The principal, Sister Mary Louise, wa standing at the back of the room. "May I please see Leticia Marquez, Debbi McClain, Lynn Whitley, and Claire Ramos in my office?"

Sister Frances Joseph seemed vexed. We all knew she didn't like her lesson interrupted, but she politely replied, "Certainly, Sister. You four girls please g with Sister Mary Louise."

The four of us looked at each other; my stomach did a somersault. I ha never been called out of class by the principal before. That's something the only happened to the bad kids. What could possibly be up? As the four of u followed Sister Mary Louise down the long hallway to her office, we gave eac other questioning glances. Then, I could tell, it occurred to all four of us at th same time. Wanda. That's why she didn't come back to class after lunch.

Just as we suspected, Wanda was sitting in the principal's office as w walked in.

"Please sit down, girls." Sister Mary Louise sat behind her desk and looke at us over her reading glasses. Her hands were folded, and her back was raze straight. "Mrs. Hinkle called me this morning. Wanda has made some ver serious accusations against all four of you." Sitting in a chair in the corne Wanda managed to look victimized, wronged, and emotionally injured Reading from her notes, Sister continued, "Wanda says that the four of yo lured her to an isolated location and then proceeded to assault her." She pause

for a second and looked at each of us. "Before calling your parents, I wanted t hear your side of the story."

Debbie looked like she was going to cry.

"She's lying," Lynn and Claire shouted out together.

"Girls, I will not tolerate such outbursts. You will each have an opportunit to speak." Turning to Lynn, "Your family has sent six children through this school. I've known your parents for many years, and I'm sure they would be appalled by this accusation against you, Lynn. What do you have to say?"

"Wanda's mistaken, Sister. It's just a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding? It is quite obvious that you girls have been in som kind of a scuffle. Why does Leticia have a fresh wound on her forehead, an why are both Debbie and Claire covered in scratches and bruises?"

"It wasn't really a fight, we were just trying to..."
"Yes?"

"We were trying to keep Wanda from getting into trouble with old ma Limbocker. See, there is this cool tree around the corner from my house. Lett climbed it on Friday after school and fell out. That's how she got the bump o her head. Fell right out and landed on her head."

"Yeah, it really hurt, and I felt really stupid," I tried to sound convincin even though I knew that lying to a nun had to be a mortal sin, and I was pavin my road to Hell.

"The reason Letty fell out is because there is a beehive way up in th branches that you can't see from the ground."

"It scared the hel... heck out of me," I interjected. "I'm allergic to be stings."

"Anyway, we went back to my house to get some ice for Letty's head. Yo can see the tree from my kitchen window. That's when we saw Wanda startin to climb it. It's really a groovy tree. Everyone who sees it wants to climb it. It all gnarled with giant branches." Lynn turned to the rest of us for confirmation We nodded our heads for Sister's benefit. "We started tapping on the window t get her attention, but she didn't hear us."

Wanda was getting agitated and tried to interrupt, but Sister held up her han to silence her. Lynn continued, "Anyway, we ran outside to tell her about th beehive, but she didn't believe us. You see, Sister, Wanda and I don't really ge along, so I can understand why she thought we might be making it up. Sh probably thought we were trying to keep the tree to ourselves. And I guess yo could say it's in an isolated location. It's between my house and old ma

Limbocker's. You really can't see it from the street because of all the jun that's stored in his side yard."

Sister seemed skeptical, "How did Debbie and Claire get those nast scratches?"

"Well, since Wanda didn't believe us, we had to yank her out of the tree. She put up a pretty good fight. I guess that's why she thought we were trying to beather up or something. I don't blame her, I would have thought the same thing four girls were trying to yank me out of a tree. Anyway, we were pulling shard that by the time she let go, Debbie and Claire fell in the rose bushes. That's when Wanda got up and ran away."

Sister looked over at Wanda, "Were you climbing a tree yesterday?" "Yes, but..."

Lynn cut her short, "We weren't trying to beat you up. We just didn't war you to get stung by the bees. Plus, Sister, old man Limbocker likes to call th police when he catches kids on his property. He's had problems with kid stealing his tomatoes and breaking his windows. Did you know that there's u to a one hundred dollar fine for breaking someone's windows?" Lynn glance in Wanda's direction.

"Windows?" asked Sister.

"Yeah, old man Limbocker caught some boys throwing rocks at his window last summer and the police said that they could be arrested for breaking th windows on a house. It's called malicious mischief and destruction of property Even if the house isn't being lived in because it still belongs to someone. Yo have to pay the fine and replace the windows and get put on probation. It awful. Plus it goes on your permanent record. Something like that could kee you out of college." Lynn turned to Wanda, "My dad's a lawyer and he said that vandalism can be a very serious crime."

I secretly thanked God (just in case there was one) that Wanda was n dummy. She knew we had her cornered. If she insisted that we beat her up, sh knew we would snitch on her for breaking the window of Afton's house. Th evidence lay shattered on the floor of the turret room.

It only took her a moment to weigh the pros and cons of sticking to he story. "Oh, I didn't realize," she said through clenched teeth. "I just assume because they're always so mean and hateful to me that they were trying to beame up." Wanda turned to Sister with downcast eyes. "I don't know what I di to make them dislike me so much. I guess I overreacted. All I've ever wante was to just be friends with everyone. I'm sorry, Sister, for wasting your time."

"I see," Sister Mary Louise said, taking off her glasses and rubbing th bridge of her nose. "Then you owe these girls an apology as well as a thank yo for looking out for your well-being."

Wanda would have sooner spent nine days praying a novena or paying a indulgence than thank us for anything, but she said, "Thank you, and I'r sorry." What an actress! She actually managed to sound sincere.

Sister Mary Louise then turned her attention to us. "There's no reason for any of you to be mean to each other. Whatever problems you girls may have with each other, work them out. Think about how the Lord Jesus would behave That's the kind of behavior you need to strive for. I want all of you to pray the he gives you strength. Let us pray."

We all bowed our heads.

"Dear Lord, please help us to follow your teachings and treat others as w wish to be treated. Help us to forgive those who trespass against us, and help u to love our neighbor in your name. In the name of the Father and of the So and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

"Amen," we all said together.

Sister paused to let her counsel sink in. "Well, I hope you all learned from this experience."

"Yes, Sister," said Debbie with obvious relief.

"Yes, Sister, we definitely did," added Claire.

"Does anyone else have anything to say?"

"No, Sister," again together.

"Good. Then this matter is closed. Go back to class. There are just a few more weeks left until the end of the school year, and I don't expect to see an of you back in my office again."

"No, Sister."

"Thank you, Sister."

The five of us left Sister's office with as much piety as we could muster. A we walked back to our classroom, Wanda stopped in the hall.

"You know what you just did was blackmail," she jeered.

"And what you were doing was lying to get us into trouble, so we're even."

"You probably made up that stuff about malicious mischief."

"Maybe I did, and maybe I didn't."

"Why don't you go break some more windows and find out," Clair suggested.

Wanda sneered and walked to class. The rest of us followed.

Sister Frances Joseph was still droning on about bread lines. "Twenty-fiv percent of Americans were unemployed, people were homeless, and childre were starving..."

My mind drifted. I came really close to being in big trouble—real trouble but worse than that, Afton's house had been violated. A broken window wa like a cut on the face. Defacing the beauty of the surface and leaving a scar fc all to see. Instead of bringing me a sense of calm and security as it once had the house was filling me with anxiety. The secret was out. Wanda and Corbi knew about it as well as Lynn's brother and his group of friends. How man other people had they told? How many people from the hospital knew? No only did I feel uneasy, but I could sense that something dreadful was imminent

HEAVEN

AND HELL

The morning's catechism lesson focused on original sin.

"Adam and Eve were cast out of the garden of Eden because Eve was weak and could not resist temptation." Destructo had obviously been preparing for the lesson. "This was her original sin, and all mankind is now born with that sin. Catholics can cleanse themselves of that original sin by receiving the sacrament of baptism soon after we are born." She paced in front of the room, gesticulating to add emphasis. "And it is only through the teachings of the Church and through prayer, that man can get the strength to resist sinning in the future. People who don't pray for strength from God risk eternal damnation."

The class seemed riveted, but I was having my doubts.

Debbie raised her hand. "Sister Martha, I heard on the news last night that a 1.8-million-year-old human skull was discovered in Africa. Do you think that the skull might be Adam or Eve?"

"I saw that, too," Tim added. "The guy on the news said that it might prove that man is descended from different groups of people."

"Is that true?" Debbie asked.

"Oh, no, no." Destructo gave Debbie an amused smile. "That's not possible. What you probably saw on the news is a belief that mankind descended from different groups of original humans. That's called polygenism. Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical years ago stating that the Catholic Church does not accept that theory. As we all know, mankind descended from Adam and Eve. *Only* Adam and Eve," Destructo gave the class an emphatic stare. "All that scientific 'evidence' is just theory. The Bible is the truth. It's the word of God."

Bravely, Blythe raised her hand. "But the Pope issued that encyclical before they found the skull. Maybe he's wrong."

Destructo shook her head, keeping her budding anger in check. "No. The Pope is never wrong. He is infallible," she declared with complete certainty. "Then why would they say that on the news?" Lynn asked.

Destructo took a deep breath, "Good question, Lynn. It's an example of how people who don't have faith in God, or who don't know the teachings of the Church, can be led astray." Destructo's irritation turned to excitement. "Actually, thank you for bringing that up," she said, nodding to Debbie. "This is exactly why all of you are so lucky to be here learning about the Catholic faith. This is a good example of how your belief in the teachings of the Church will constantly be tested. You must learn to not be confused by people who don't share our faith. Your reward will be a place in the Kingdom of Heaven. Let's go on."

But I didn't want to go on. It suddenly all seemed so ridiculous. I doubted. I was losing my faith. Guilt for no longer believing in God made me wince, but I couldn't help but dwell on the 1.8-million-year-old skull. Even if there was no God, Adam's or Eve's skull had to be somewhere. Plus, what about the dinosaurs? They aren't in the Bible. And I was still having a lot of trouble with the Heaven and Hell stuff. If there's no God, then does that mean there's no Devil either? No Hell? How could Lance and Kyle Kirtland's dad go to Hell for committing suicide? Plus, he wasn't even Catholic. Is Alana's mom going to Hell because she lets her boyfriend spend the night? What about Chiara and Donald? They are living in sin. So what's the punishment for sinning if there's no Heaven or Hell?

And why couldn't there be different kinds of people like there are different kinds of dogs and cats? Poodles and retrievers. Siamese and calicos. Wouldn't that be cool? But then I thought about the riots from a few years ago and all the prejudice in the world. Maybe it wouldn't be so cool. I didn't like thinking about this stuff.

As soon as we sat at our lunch table Debbie announced, "You'll never guess what my brother got for this birthday yesterday." She didn't wait for us to guess. "He got an Atari Pong game."

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's a ping pong game you play on the television."

"Oh, yeah, I've heard of those," Claire said.

"My brothers want one, too," Lynn said, "but they're very expensive. My mom said they'd have to wait until next Christmas."

"That's too bad. It's so cool. We played with it instead of watching television until my mom made us turn it off so she could watch the news."

"Really?" It was hard to believe something was more interesting than television.

"Why don't you ask your parents for one, Letty?"

"Are you kidding? We don't even have a color T.V. yet. My parents aren't going to spring for something that expensive." I opened my paper lunch bag and looked inside, "Especially now that we're moving." Suddenly, I wasn't hungry anymore.

With fifteen minutes left until the bell rang, we got up and meandered around the playground until we saw Blythe and her friends by the water fountain.

"Hey, Lynn, Debbie and the rest of you guys. Come here for a minute. We need your opinion about something."

"What's up?" Lynn asked.

"We need to make a decision about what to wear for graduation. It's only one month away, so we need to start shopping for our dresses." Blythe was all business. "Sheila thinks we should all wear mini-skirts and pastels. I say maxi-skirts in psychedelic colors."

"I think we should all wear boots," suggested Helen. "They're groovy with a mini-skirt and a choker."

Graduation was going to be one of the rare days where we weren't required to wear our uniform, so I excitedly contributed to the conversation. "Pastels don't look good on me. My mother says they make me look washed out because of my olive complexion, so how about psychedelic colors?" I asked.

"Just because you're the only one with that problem doesn't mean the rest of us can't wear pastels," Sheila retorted.

"I didn't say you couldn't."

Claire came to my defense. "Why don't we all just wear what we want? Aren't we supposed to be individuals and do our own thing?"

"Yeah, you might be right. Besides, do you really think Karen Van Arsdale is going to find a mini-skirt to fit her big butt?" Sharon Hanson joined in.

Sheila was unsympathetic. "We're the class of '72," she said, shaking her head. "We need a theme."

"We have a theme," continued Claire, "Individualism."

We didn't come to a consensus on the dresses, but we all agreed to wear high heels and nylons. The days of saddle shoes and bobby socks were over for us. Life just kept moving forward.

After school, we decided to go over to Afton's house to clean up the shards of glass in the turret room. Wanda had been telling everyone she knew about the house, but so far, no one seemed to be interested.

Debbie planned ahead and brought a little whiskbroom and a paper bag. "What should we do with this bag full of broken glass?"

"I guess we need to take it back with us and throw it in the trash," I said.

"What about putting it down in the basement?" Lynn proposed. It had never occurred to us before to go into the basement. "My grandparents' house back East has an incinerator in their basement. That's where all the trash goes."

"Go ahead Lynn, we'll wait here," replied Claire.

"I'm not going by myself."

"But it was your idea."

"What I meant was, we should all go."

"We really can't say that we've been in every room of this house unless we go down into the basement." Debbie never overlooked the technical details. "And up to the attic." We all looked up at the ceiling.

"The attic is closer," I said.

"How would we get there? There aren't any more stairs," Lynn pointed out.

"Maybe we just overlooked them," I said. "Let's go see if we can find another set of stairs behind a door or something."

"Or one of those little pull down thingies in the ceiling," suggested Claire.

"They're probably on the third floor off one of the servants' rooms." Lynn set the bag of shards on the floor outside of the staircase to the third floor. The air got warmer as we reached the top of the stairs.

"Do you think anyone would notice from the outside if we opened one of those windows," asked Claire as we entered the first servant's room. "It would be a lot cooler here if we let in a breeze." Lynn examined the window for nails. Not seeing any, she turned the rusty latch with a bit of effort. The window opened—just a few inches, but enough to let fresh air in and cool the room.

"Great, *these* windows open," I said.

"Okay, let's look for a way to get into the attic." There wasn't anything resembling access to the attic in that room, so we moved on to the next. Again, it was just a small room with a dormer window. It was in the fourth room where we finally found a small door in a corner we had overlooked.

"Okay, that's either a closet or what we're looking for."

"Go ahead, Lynn. You're the door opener," I said. Lynn opened the door with a mild tug. We all found ourselves staring across the blue sky over the treetops.

"Cool!"

"This is so neat. We can walk right out on the roof."

"You first, Mrs. Rochester," Debbie motioned for me to pass through.

"Who?"

"You know, the crazy wife in *Jane Eyre*."

"Oh, yeah."

The door opened to a catwalk on the roof of the second floor. If we scrunched together, we could all stand just outside the door. We could see the top half of the crucifix on the spire of Saint Benedict's church. The breeze was stronger up there, and the coolness was refreshing.

"It's so peaceful," said Debbie.

"If I had one of these on my house, I'd spend the whole day up on the roof." Lynn started humming the tune from the James Taylor song.

"The courtyard looks so far away. We're really high up." Debbie said.

"Just don't look down Debbie," I said.

"Oh, look!" Claire pointed to the west. "What's that over there?"

"That must be the roof of the hospital."

"It looks so much closer from up here."

"Do you think they can see us?"

"Nah. They'd have to be standing on the roof."

We stayed outside for several more minutes enjoying the scenery. There was obviously no attic, so we decided it was time to head in the opposite direction: the basement.

We picked up the paper bag on our way to the basement door in the kitchen. Entering through the butler's pantry, my attention was drawn to the

wisteria, which had started to bloom just outside the window. I noticed for the first time that the entire rose garden was visible from the kitchen, and the bushes were in full bloom.

"Look, you guys." The other three gathered around me.

"Isn't that pretty? I wouldn't mind washing dishes if I had a rose garden to look at."

"Maybe the gardener and the cook were sweethearts," Lynn said.

Claire put her arm around Debbie, "I bet he said, 'The Missus wants me to plant a rose garden. I think I'll put it right out there where you can see the pretty roses bloom while you prepare the dinner, my love."

"Oh, Herbert. You are so clever," Debbie played along. "Every time I look out the window, I'll think of you, Duckie."

"Duckie?" Lynn said as she raised an eyebrow.

"It's what my grandma used to call my grandpa."

"You're so weird," Lynn said. The rest of us just sighed, daydreaming about the possibilities.

I stood fixed in my spot for a few seconds more until my mind could be transported back to 1972. Finally, realizing that it could be postponed no longer, I turned to face the door of the basement. It was the one door we never touched in the six months that we had been coming to the house. A solid wooden door painted a dull yellow and covered in cobwebs, it was partially opened and a foot or two of the landing was visible from where we stood.

"It's really, really dark down there," Debbie said.

"Yeah, I guess we'd better come back with a flashlight some other day." I said in agreement.

"It can't be totally dark. There're basement windows all along the sides and the back of the house. Remember?"

"Well, it looks dark from up here."

"Maybe there's another door at the bottom of the steps shutting out the light."

"Okay, let's at least *look* down the stairs."

We all agreed that we could do that much. Lynn walked over to the doorway, reached across, and pushed the door open wider. The hinges creaked until it was fully open. The four of us craned our necks to look down the stairwell. The dim light of day revealed another landing about six or seven steps down.

"See, I told you guys the basement windows let in light."

"Well, then what are we waiting for?" With a shot of courage, Claire started down first. She reached her hand out to grab the railing and took the first step. I stayed close behind her, and Lynn and Debbie followed.

Before reaching the landing, Claire flung her arms up over her head, "Aaaah!"

The rest of us screamed.

"What? What? What?"

"Spider web."

"Christ! You scared the crap out of me."

"Then you go first."

"Just keep going." We all continued until we got to the landing. The dimmest of light crept in through the three windows on the wall in front of us, but the recesses of the basement were still black as pitch.

"Wait a second while our eyes adjust to the dark."

After a few minutes, the basement revealed itself. There was a wall behind us, and the basement seemed to turn a corner ahead of us. As far as we could see, it was as empty as the rest of the house. The floor was dirt, and the walls were made of brick. The air was cool but musty, and I wondered why Debbie hadn't started complaining about her asthma.

"Okay, we've seen it. Let's go," I said.

"Why isn't it as big as the rest of the house?" Lynn couldn't just leave well enough alone.

"Well, if you think about it," explained Debbie, "the courtyard wouldn't have a basement under it."

"Oh, yeah."

"Let's go," I said again, eager to leave. We turned to go back up the stairs.

"Wait a second," Claire held out her hand to keep us in place. "I think I see something," she said pointing to the corner. We all tried to focus in that direction. "I think it's a box."

"It is!"

"Want to go check it out?" Claire asked.

"Maybe it's a forgotten treasure," I guessed.

Claire was more realistic. "Maybe it's thousands of dollars in stolen money left here by Bonnie and Clyde or Baby Face Nelson."

"Maybe it's the bones of the gardener after the cook killed him with a meat cleaver for cheating on her with the chambermaid."

Debbie slapped Lynn on the arm for the millionth time and said, "Why are you always doing that?"

We did a quick reconnaissance to confirm that there was nothing else in the basement. Holding on to each other, we slowly made our way over to the corner. Our shoes kicked up a bit of dust, which made me scrunch up my nose. There was, indeed, a crate made out of wooden slats such as those used to collect harvested fruit. As we got closer, Debbie noticed writing on the side.

"Wait. Look, there is something written on the side," Debbie said as we got closer.

"It says 'Dr. Tichenor's."

"Why does that sound familiar?" I asked, wrinkling my forehead trying to remember.

"That's the medicine that Gerard Case used to sell. Remember the story we read in the microfish viewer?"

"Oh, yeah." I couldn't believe Debbie could remember these things.

"Open it," Lynn said.

"You open it."

Courageous as ever, Lynn managed to extract herself from our grip and slowly moved toward the crate. With her right foot, she gave it a mild shove. The crate scratched against the dirt. A moment later, we heard the scratch again. Before I could register the oddity of such a phenomenon, a giant rodent scurried out from behind it.

Our screams were deafening as we flew up the stairs barely touching the wooden steps. Debbie ran toward the front entry hall while Claire and Lynn crashed into the kitchen door desperately pulling on the doorknob in their attempt to escape. I followed Debbie to the front door where we threw our arms around each other and resumed our screaming as we jumped up and down.

"Oh, my God! Oh, my God!"

Claire and Lynn came running, and we all reunited in the entry hall, panting and holding our hands over our hearts.

"What was it?"

"I'm pretty sure it was a rat."

"That's the biggest friggin' rat I've ever seen."

Forgetting about our new access through the parlor window, we crossed the courtyard and climbed over the roof, leaving the bag of broken glass behind. The trellis was starting to crack from our repeated climbings, so we got into the habit of jumping when we were halfway down. I lost my balance when I landed, so I reached out with my hands to break my fall, scraping both of my palms and my right knee.

"Criminy! I'm in trouble again!" I said out loud.

Filled with adrenaline, I nearly ran the whole way home. I couldn't help thinking the rat was chasing me. The thought of it running up my bare legs made me shudder with every step. I just hoped it wouldn't give me nightmares. But it does to this day.

When I got home, my mother was standing on the front porch. "Your brothers have been home for over an hour. ¿Dónde estabas?"

"I walk slow," I said, panting.

"Don't be insolent." She grabbed my arm and escorted me through the door. "Why are you so dirty? Look at your hands. Now what happened? Didn't I tell you to be more careful? When are you going to learn how to be a lady? How do you ever expect to get married if you can't stay clean walking home from school? You look like a common laborer. No boy will ever want a girl who doesn't demonstrate poise and grace. All your cousins will be married, and you'll be left behind."

Jeez.

[&]quot;Well, it's dead now. We gave it a heart attack with our screaming."

[&]quot;I'm never going back into that basement."

[&]quot;Me neither."

[&]quot;I'm outta here."

TAKING IT TO THE STREETS

"They're tearing it down." After what happened at Afton's house a few weeks ago, Wanda had no right to address us with such uninvited determination, but there she was.

"Who's tearing what down?" I asked.

"Your precious 'Afton's house," she said with odious pleasure.

I was confused. "What are you talking about?"

"The house across the street," she said pointing to the wrought iron fence and the trees. "It's going to be torn down."

The declaration hit me like a baseball bat to the skull.

"You're lying!"

"That house has been there for almost one hundred years. Why would they tear it down now?" Lynn asked.

The look on Wanda's face was triumphant, "The hospital wants to expand its parking lot. My mom works in the office of the city planning commission. She files the applications for building permits. The hospital wants to tear down the house and expand its cancer ward and build a parking garage."

"But they can't!" Lynn shouted.

"Sure they can, and they are. It has already been approved. It's just a house. What's the big deal?"

"But it's Afton's house." I couldn't believe she didn't understand that.

"What about the trees?" Lynn asked.

"What's more important, sick people seeing a doctor or seeing trees?" Lynn, Debbie, Claire, and I were dumbfounded.

"I'm going back over there today and finish breaking all the windows. The police wouldn't care if the house is going to be torn down anyway." Her words were daggers to my heart, and she was relishing my pain. How could anyone be so mean? So cold and calloused? All I could do was give her a dirty look and walk away. This had to sink in.

"She's lying," Debbie said, more angry than I had ever seen her.

"She has to be," Claire agreed.

"She just said that to hurt us. God! She's such a bitch!"

"I know she is, but what if she's not lying?" The thought made my hands go numb.

"How can we find out for sure?" Claire and Debbie both asked at once.

We wrung our hands and paced the playground at a loss for what to do or where to go. At the same time, I felt a surge of hatred. I had never before wished that there was a Hell so Wanda could burn for all eternity.

"Oh, I know!" Lynn announced. "Bob's father works at Case Memorial. He'll know if it's true or not. Let's ask him."

The four of us approaching Bob Whelan was a sight to see. We called him Bob the Slob because he was such a mess—overweight, shirt untucked, laces undone, hair disheveled—but this was urgent. We found him sitting on a planter behind the church reading a book and eating a baloney sandwich.

"Bob, we need to ask you something," Lynn said as we approached.

He looked at us through cock-eyed glasses. "What do you want?"

"Doesn't your dad work at Case Memorial?"

"Yeah, he's the Director of Pharmacy. What's it to you?"

"Can you ask him a question for us?"

"Maybe."

"Ask him if he knows if the hospital is thinking about building a parking lot and expanding its cancer ward."

"How can a hospital 'think' about anything?" Typical Bob.

Lynn rolled her eyes.

"You know what we mean."

"Okay."

"Promise you'll ask. It's important."

"I said 'okay."

We stood there for another second or two just staring at him, waiting for telepathic confirmation.

"Anything else?" he asked.

We walked away. Wanda had to be lying. She just had to. That afternoon we didn't hesitate to stash our book bags in the bushes and make our way to the house. Everything about it seemed different. I saw it with new clarity as if it was suddenly in focus, and if I didn't imbed the image in my mind, it would be lost forever. Yes, the birds in the trees sang just as sweetly and the squirrels scampered about with their fluid tails behind them just as quickly, but time was fleeting. My throat had a lump. My stomach churned with a feeling that I had never experienced before. I was afraid.

"What if it's true?" It was hard to even get the words out.

"We'll protest," Lynn said.

"Who do we protest to?"

"The hospital," said Claire.

"The city," said Lynn. "This is a historic building. We can have it declared a historic monument."

Thus was born a fledgling hope.

After discussing how one goes about contacting the Office of Historic Monuments, we decided that we needed to wait and see if Wanda's vicious rumor was true. We waited around for a bit just in case she showed up to break the rest of the windows like she claimed. Of course, she didn't show. She was all talk. A good omen. Still, we decided to get to school early the next morning to accost Bob as soon as he emerged from his mother's station wagon.

It was overcast, so my hair was starting to frizz as we waited on the front steps to the office. We didn't know which route Bob the Slob normally used to get to school. Some kids were dropped off by the church parking lot and others entered by the side gate. Despite the brisk morning air, my palms were sweaty. The first bell rang, signaling that we needed to line up by our classroom door. But still no Bob. Few boys in the history of the eighth grade ever had four girls so anxiously waiting for their arrival. Finally, as we were entering the building, Bob's mom pulled into the parking lot. Bob jumped out, dropping his lunch in the process, and shuffled up to the rear of the line just in time to walk in without being marked tardy. We were going to have to wait until recess to talk to him.

The two hours before recess were agony for me waiting to find out what Bob's father said. Of course, the four of us tried every way we could think of to get his attention during class—passing notes, waving, sign language. Nothing. The kid was as observant as concrete. When the bell finally rang

for recess, Debbie, Lynn, Claire, and I jumped over the desks, knocking kids out of our way to get our answer.

"Bob, what did your father say about the hospital?"

He fumbled through his book bag looking for his snack. Without looking up he said, "The hospital needs to build a parking garage 'cause they're expanding."

"But are they going to tear down the house to do it? Do they need to expand all the way to Afton's house?"

"I don't know who that is. You didn't ask me to ask my dad about anyone named Afton. He said that they are going to bulldoze the trees all the way to the corner and make the hospital more modern." He walked away and with him he took what was left of our childhood dreams. The last constant in my life was going to be torn down.

The rest of the day was interminable. Froggie droned on in literature class as if he were speaking in slow motion. "The Lady, or the Tiger" should have been a captivating short story to incite our love of literature. Instead, it brought me near tears. To tear down Afton's house was barbaric like the king in the story. He sentenced a man to an arena where he had to choose between two doors. Behind one stood a lady. If he chose that door, he was to immediately marry her and be pardoned for his crime. Behind the other paced a tiger. If he chose that door, he would be mauled to death and eaten before the cheering crowds. The king sat enjoying the suspense as the man agonized over his decision.

I couldn't help thinking, is this what God does? Do we live our lives standing before two doors, one to Heaven and one to Hell? Do people live their lives by chance, or are their futures predetermined? And if so, by whom? Does God sit in his Heaven and say this man will be rich and this one will be poor? This child will live her life in a wheelchair, and this child will win a gold medal in the Olympics. Will malevolent dictators come to power and kill millions of people, and will little children in Africa die before their first birthdays? There was no point in living if this God that I was supposed to believe in played with us like I once played with my Barbie dolls. Man had more control than I was being led to believe. I began to understand that it was solely up to me to take control of which doors I chose to open or close. I wasn't ready to close the door on Afton's house.

If protesting was what we had to do to save the house, then protest we would. The news was full of stories about different protests around the

country. Anti-war demonstrations were going on all the time. Students at Columbia University were arrested for protesting the war. When I was in the first and second grade, I remember black people were constantly protesting for their civil rights. People were protesting everything from nuclear power and DDT to the Equal Rights Amendment. I could do this. I had to do this.

We got together after school to strategize before going home.

"Okay, how exactly do you stage a protest?" I was becoming increasingly aware that we were clueless fourteen-year-olds with no understanding of the complexity of the world.

"Don't you just make up signs and march up and down the street?" Claire said.

"Yeah, but there are just the four of us and the protests on the news always have hundreds of people." Lynn was right about that.

"And sometimes they chain themselves to something. We could do that, or even better, we could climb the trees and refuse to come down until our demands are met."

"Oh! Right, yeah. People do that."

"What do we do if it starts to get dark and we have to go home?"

We had to get some advice. My parents weren't going to be any help, so we turned to Lynn's dad. He was a lawyer and had been to college. He had to know something even though he was over thirty and we weren't supposed to trust him. We gave Lynn a list of questions to ask:

- 1. How many people do you need for a protest?
- 2. Where should the protest take place?
- 3. How do you get something declared a historic monument?
- 4. Who has the power to stop the building of a parking garage?
- 5. What happens if we get arrested?
- 6. If we do get arrested, will they call our parents?

We met in front of the church the next morning before school to see what she found out. It was a lesson in teenage ignorance.

"He wants to know what we're protesting." Apparently, that was an important detail.

"Didn't you tell him about the house?" I nearly shouted.

"No, because we swore never to tell anyone."

"Yeah, well, everyone already knows about it, and this is an emergency!" Claire was visibly agitated.

"Well, he did say that protests work better if there are a lot of people. That way it gets on the news. He said we need public sympathy first and foremost."

Saving the house meant making even more people aware of its existence. We had to think this through.

"We need to get other people to realize how important Afton's house is," Debbie said.

"The best way to do that is to take them there, show them how magnificent it is, and convince them that the house is worth saving."

"Yeah, we need to get people on our side."

"Who can we trust?"

"What if, before we start a protest, we just ask the hospital to not tear it down?"

"Yeah, maybe they don't think anyone cares about it."

"Do you really think they would listen to four girls?" Lynn had a point. "We at least need to get a big group to go together."

"Okay, today during recess and lunch let's go to all the kids we think we can trust and tell them what we're doing. We'll plan a time and place to meet after school and all walk over together."

"Let's ask Blythe James and Suzette Palmer."

"Okay. They'll be good. How about some kids from the other grades?"

We made a list of about ten kids we thought we could count on. The first person I thought of was Jeff. I knew he would want to be walking with me in the protest, so at recess I ventured into the boys' yard to look for him. It was quite a dangerous place. Basketballs and kickballs were flying indiscriminately through the air.

"Where's Jeff Hanover hang out?" I asked Tim Hennessey waiting his turn for kickball.

"He usually plays basketball over there," he replied pointing across three basketball courts and two kickball diamonds. *How am I going to get over there*? I thought to myself. *It's a death zone*. As I considered my options for the best route, I saw Jeff standing by the church. His back was to me, and both his arms were extended against the wall as if he were the only thing keeping the building from collapsing. As I got closer ,I saw the hem of the

familiar blue and gray plaid skirt of a girl leaning against the church wall. *Girls aren't allowed in the boys' yard*, I thought before remembering that I was a girl in the boys' yard.

I wondered whom he was talking to. As I got closer, I realized what was going on. Hurt, mixed with indignation, changed my stride as I approached for a confrontation. If he thought he was going to be making out with some other girl behind my back, he had another thing coming. What I saw stopped me dead in my saddle shoes.

Wanda.

COURAGE IS CONTAGIOUS

"That's why she was so mad at us. You were making out with her boyfriend on the Ferris wheel," Lynn said.

"He isn't her boyfriend. We would have all known if they were going steady. You know her. She has to brag about everything." My eyes welled up. "She probably just has a crush on him and is stealing him away from me just to hurt me." I started crying all over again.

We were sitting on the balcony in front of Afton's house. The others knew something was wrong when I came in from recess, but I just couldn't bring myself to tell them what I had seen. I barely maintained my composure all through school and then burst into tears when the dismissal bell rang. Being true friends, they knew that I needed them. We went to the house after school as we usually did during a crisis. It was the only place I felt safe. It was the only place where I could express what I was feeling.

"Boys are such jerks. My sister caught her boyfriend cheating on her with her best friend." I knew Debbie was trying to console me.

"He isn't my boyfriend," I managed to say between crying spasms. "If we had been going steady, it would be even more humiliating."

"Then why are you so upset?" Claire asked.

"Because I thought he liked me. I thought he was someone I could count on. He made it sound like we would, you know, be together in high school, but he was just using me."

Debbie scooted closer to me and held her hand over her heart:

Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more; Men were deceivers ever; One foot in sea and one on shore, To one thing constant never; Then sigh not so, But let them go, And be you blithe and bonny; Converting all your sounds of woe Into. Hey nonny, nonny.

When she was finished, we all just looked at her.

"What?" Debbie asked, "It's Shakespeare. From *Much Ado About Nothing*. I'm just trying to help."

Lynn turned her attention back to me. "As soon as he realizes how selfabsorbed Wanda is, he'll come crawling back."

"Well, he better not come crawling back to me. I don't ever want to have anything to do with that low life cheating scumbag! I hope he burns in Hell! I feel like such a tramp!"

"You're not a tramp. All you did was kiss him, and it was only that one time."

I ignored Lynn's appeal to my sense of logic.

"A tramp is someone who has sex with lots of guys. You didn't have sex with him," Claire pointed out.

"I know, but I still feel like one. How embarrassing." I hiccupped. "Now I have to go through life knowing my first kiss was with a gigolo." I couldn't believe my mother was right. Boys were only after one thing. I was sure all the boys at school were whispering behind my back, *Letty Marquez puts out*, even if it wasn't true. I just hoped my soiled reputation didn't follow me to my new school.

The sun had moved behind the roof, and we were sitting in the shade. As the others looked out at the sycamore trees, I was too involved in my self-pity to realize that my three friends had given up on me. After a few more minutes of wallowing in self-imposed misery, I finally dried my eyes and looked up. That's when I remembered that our days here were coming to an end. Where would I go in the future when I needed to think things through? Would Afton and her sons now be forgotten forever? How could anyone think of tearing down this fantastic house? This question brought me to my senses.

"Okay, we've got more important things to do than sit here while I feel sorry for myself," I said.

The absurdity of my crying jag over Jeff Hanover occurred to me as I walked home. The humiliation of being duped by him was nothing compared to how I carried on about it. I swore that was the last time I would ever cry over some boy. From now on, I will decide who kisses me. I will decide whose hand I hold. My relationships would be on my terms.

I walked in my front door and realized it wasn't locked. Strange. My mom was on the phone, and I could tell by the look on her face that something was wrong. She was talking to my *Tía Panchita*.

"¿Cuándo?" she said. "¡Ay por Dios!"

When I saw the look on her face, my arms turned to goose flesh. As soon as she hung up, I asked, "¿Qué paso?"

"Your cousin, Emilio, has been drafted."

"You're kidding." That was the last thing I expected to hear. "I thought they stopped the draft."

"They started it back up again."

"But he just graduated from high school last year! When does he have to report?"

"He goes in for his physical next week." My mother said, wiping her eyes as she went into her room and closed the door.

My brother, Eddie, was beside himself all through dinner. Eddie was only two years younger than Emilio, and he had always looked up to him. Whatever Emilio did, Eddie was just steps behind.

"How much longer do you think this war is going to go on?" he asked me during dinner.

After I got over the shock of Eddie asking me anything, I replied, "I don't know. World War II only lasted four years." I did a quick mental calculation. "This war has been going on for something like eight or nine now. There was a war in Europe that lasted for one hundred years."

"Liar!"

"No. Really. It was called the Hundred Years War. I learned about it last year in history class."

Eddie held his head in his hands over his *frijoles*.



"Take your elbows off the table," my mother scolded. "Show some respect."

It was mid-May and the school year was winding down. Yet, so much was happening. At school, both of the eighth grade classes were put into groups to prepare for the Academic Bee. There were four subject categories: literature, mathematics, science, and social sciences. The groups would hold preliminary rounds to eventually send one boy and one girl in each subject category to the final competition. The final competition was held after school in the auditorium, and parents were invited.

I made it to a respectable middle of the pack in social studies before being eliminated for not knowing that aluminum is extracted from Bauxite. Lynn and Debbie always made it to the finals, and that year was no different.

At home, my parents were cleaning out the garage little by little and giving away stuff they didn't want to take with us to our new house. I had a big report due in history class, and still had to finish reading *Old Yeller* before Monday. And even though I needed to help plan the protest, I felt bad that Eddie was so worried about getting drafted. I decided to stay after class the next day and ask Sister Frances Joseph what she knew about the war.

"Sister," I said. "My cousin got drafted and has to go in for his army physical next week."

"Oh, Letty, I'm sorry to hear that. But service to one's country is one of the most honorable things a citizen can do. *Dulce et decorum est...* I'll pray that God watches over him."

"Actually, I wanted to ask if you knew how long the war was going to last?"

She suppressed a smile, "There is no way I can know that, Leticia."

"I'm asking for my brother, Eddie."

"Oh, yes. I remember Eddie. I hope he is doing better in high school."

"Yes, Sister, he is. But he's afraid that if the war doesn't end soon, he'll get drafted as soon as he turns eighteen."

I'd never seen Sister hesitate before speaking, and I had the feeling she didn't have anything good to say.

"The representatives of both the United States and South Vietnam have walked out of the Paris peace talks. It doesn't look like the end is anywhere

near."

"Oh." It was worse than I thought. "Thank you, Sister." I said as I turned to leave.

"Leticia." She stopped me as I got to the door. "Everything will turn out alright. Have faith in the Lord."

Normally, I would have ignored such a comment, but now it seemed that those words made me angry. The Lord has had two thousand years to fix things. What was he waiting for? And what were the United States and the Vietnamese representatives doing leaving the peace talks? When little kids get into fights, grown-ups make them apologize and shake hands before letting them go out and play again. Shouldn't national representatives have to follow the same rules? Why were they acting like children?

As soon as I got to the playground, Lynn and Claire made a beeline to me. "Where have you been?"

"I was talking..."

"Never mind." Lynn interrupted. "We got Rex Nilsson and Nick Woodruff to help us in our protest."

"Aren't they in the seventh grade?"

"Yeah. So?"

"Nothing. Just asking."

"Rex wants to be an architect when he grows up, and Nick is his best friend," Claire said by way of an explanation.

Debbie ran over to us excitedly with her news. "Blythe James wants to go with us. She's going to call Suzette Palmer tonight and see if she can come as well."

"Okay, that's eight of us."

"Let's meet at the side gate as soon as school is over tomorrow. We'll all walk over to the hospital together."

"Who are we going to talk to? I mean who's in charge of a hospital." We looked at Claire since her father was a doctor and should obviously know such things.

"We're supposed to talk to the board of directors. They're the ones who make those decisions." She had definitely done her homework.

"So tonight, think of what you're going to say," Lynn was working out the details. "Remember to be polite, but serious. We need to let them know we're not just whiny kids and that this is important."

"Okay, we'll be ready."

That night I sat in front of the television as usual to do my homework. When the math problems started getting too hard, I put them away and pulled out a fresh sheet of paper. At the top, I wrote "Reasons to Not Tear Down the Fellows House." Of course, my first reason was that it was special, but I didn't think that anyone would take that very seriously. Then I thought I could argue that it was a good way to keep the noise of the playground away from the patients in the hospital who were trying to sleep. Perfect! Now I was getting somewhere. The re-run of *Gilligan's Island* on television was suddenly interrupted by a news flash.

"Governor Wallace has been shot," the man on the news was saying.

My brother Manny moaned, "They're interrupting *Gilligan's Island*! Change the channel, Diego."

Diego kept turning the dial, but every channel had the news about Governor Wallace being shot, so we had to watch until it was over.

"Who is this guy?" asked Eddie.

"Aren't you listening? The reporter just said that he was running for president."

"I thought that was Nixon."

I rolled my eyes as I shook my head. "He has to run against somebody, stupid!"

"Don't call me stupid. I know that. Look, he's running against all those other guys. See, McGovern, Humphrey, whoa! Who's that?"

I sat up in my chair. "Be quiet and listen," I said waving for him to shush. A picture of a black woman was on the television.

"She can't be running for president!"

"Why not?"

"A girl can't be president."

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't legal. Plus, she's black. You can't have a black woman be president. Everyone knows that."

Sometimes Eddie made me so mad I could spit. But maybe he was right. If girls couldn't be altar boys, they probably couldn't run for president either. I decided to talk to Sister again tomorrow.

I didn't want to be a pest, so I waited for history class. We were right in the middle of World War II. Sister was handing out ditto maps of the world.

"The instructions are on the board," she said. "As you can see, you are to color the Allied Powers green, the Axis Powers red, and neutral countries

yellow. Anyone not have a green, red, and yellow crayon? You'll be graded on neatness, so work carefully. Any questions?"

I raised my hand, "Sister, can a woman be president?"

"Yes, of course." Some of the kids in class gasped.

"If a woman is president, who would be the first lady," Renée asked.

"There doesn't have to be a first lady," Sister smiled. "Grover Cleveland wasn't married when he became president."

I raised my hand again, "Can a black person be president?"

"Oh, I see what you're getting at," Sister said. "Yes, a Negro can be president. In fact, Shirley Chisholm is a black woman who is running for president in this election." Again, the class gasped and the din of thirty kids talking all at once made Sister smack her ruler on the podium.

"There's no way she'll win," Mitch stated unequivocally as he crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"Probably not," agreed Sister.

"Then why bother?" I asked.

"Sometimes it's not the winning that's important. Sometimes what really matters is showing people you are willing to fight the fight, even if you know you are going to lose. Standing up for what you believe in takes courage, and courage is contagious. It inspires people. If you don't at least make the effort, you've surrendered the cause, and you will spend the rest of your life wondering what could have been." Sister looked right at me. "Okay, let's get to work."

I knew what I had to do.

THE FIGHT

BEGINS

Just as planned, the four of us plus Suzette, Blythe, and the two seventh grade boys met at the designated spot after school.

"Ready?" I said.

"Let's go." Lynn led the way.

We walked to the corner and turned right on McKinley Boulevard. The hospital was one half mile on the right, just past the walled garden that guarded our house.

Thinking we were there to visit a sick friend, the receptionist greeted us warmly. "How can I help you?"

"We want to see the director," Lynn announced.

"May I ask what this is regarding?" the receptionist was taken aback.

"We want to discuss the Fellows' house."

"The whose house?"

"The house on the other side of the parking lot behind the trees."

"Oh, yes. Maybe I can help you. Is this for a school project? What would you like to know?" The receptionist was all smiles, eager to dispense information.

"We need to talk to the director about not tearing it down."

"Oh?" She seemed deflated. "Um, just a minute." Picking up the telephone, she dialed a number while we waited. "Phyllis, there are some children here who want to talk to 'the director' about not tearing down the old house across the parking lot." I didn't care for her patronizing tone. When she hung up she told us, "The board of directors has already met this month, but that item was on the agenda a year ago. The demolition crew is scheduled to begin work on the first of next month."

I felt a knife enter my heart. "No! You don't under-stand. We want to stop them."

"The house can't be torn down!" Claire stomped her foot.

"We're going to write to the historical society to get it declared a historical monument." Lynn nearly shouted.

"Well, there is nothing we can do about that, and you really need to keep your voices down." The receptionist had changed her attitude. "You really need to leave now. This is a hospital, and there is no one here who can help you."

"We need to talk to someone!" Claire insisted.

Handing us a pamphlet, the receptionist said, "Write a letter to the address on the back. Someone will get back to you."

We all just stood there unsure of what to do. The receptionist turned her focus to an elderly couple who were waiting. Dejected, all eight of us slowly made our way out and crossed the parking lot in the direction of Afton's house.

"She didn't have to be mean like that," I said.

"She probably just pretended to be talking on the phone," Rex said.

"I wouldn't go to that hospital if I was dying," Claire pouted.

"Good idea! Let's boycott," suggested Blythe.

"Yeah. Let's wait until one of us gets sick and then not go there," Lynn retorted.

"There is no need to be sarcastic. We're here to help. Remember?" Suzette shot back.

"Sorry," Lynn said.

"That's okay," Blythe said. "Can we at least see this house?"

The four of us led the others across the parking lot toward the trees. We rounded the bougainvillea and followed the broken brick pathway toward the house.

Lynn, Debbie, Claire, and I were absorbed in our discussion of our remaining options. "We need to go to city hall and make them stop it," Lynn said.

"Can they do that?"

As the house came into view, Blythe, Suzette, and the boys gasped.

"That's it?"

"It's so cool!"

"It's huge. It looks like something right out of a history book."

Lynn ignored them and kept talking, "Tomorrow we'll go to see the mayor and explain..." She stopped mid-sentence and when we looked up,

we knew why. The front door to the house stood wide open. "Someone unlocked it?"

"What's wrong?" Blythe asked.

"The front door is always shut and locked. It can't be opened, Debbie replied.

"There must be someone here," I said looking around.

Blythe and Suzette's enthusiasm turned to caution. The eight of us slowed our pace. We hesitated under the sycamore trees before moving closer. No one was in sight. But we still approached the house vigilantly and ascended the stone steps, tip-toeing across the veranda to the front door. Stepping over the threshold into the entry hall, we looked through the courtyard windows across to the parlor.

"Who do you think opened the door?" Claire whispered to me.

I just shook my head.

"Whoever it was has the key," Lynn said.

"Are you sure this is okay?" asked Suzette.

"Yeah, we've been here a million times," Lynn reassured her.

"I don't see anyone." The boys were bursting over with excitement. "Are there any ghosts?" asked Nick.

"It's not haunted," Lynn said, but Rex seemed a little disappointed in that.

Forgetting the mystery of the open door, I asked, "Do you want to see the sunroom?" Without waiting for an answer, I quickly led the way through the entry hall, across the parlor, and into the sunroom.

"Awe! This is so cool," said Blythe. "The ceiling's so bright and colorful."

"That painting's bitchin'." Rex took out a sketchpad and started drawing the sun on the ceiling.

"Look. The floor matches except it's made of wood. Someone cut up little pieces of different colored wood to make the same design," Claire said.

The boys and Suzette walked around the room, looking out each of the windows. Blythe couldn't take her eyes off the painted ceiling.

"Can we go upstairs?" Nick asked.

"Sure," I pointed over my shoulder. "The stairs are..." Before I could finish, Rex and Nick ran out of the room.

"There's no way they can tear this down," Blythe said. "I can't believe you kept this a secret."

"We had to. We couldn't have a bunch of kids coming over here and destroying things." With that, we all looked up, wondering how two twelve-year-old boys could be so noisy.

"The window on the second floor was broken by Wanda Hinkle when she threw a rock through it," Lynn explained.

"Figures. I can't stand her. She's such a phony," Suzette said.

"She's good friends with that slut, Sharon Hanson," Blythe said. We all made a face.

"Well, now the hospital wants to destroy it, and we just can't let that happen," Lynn continued like a museum docent giving a tour. "Let me show you the rest of the house."

We walked back to the entry hall and shouted for the boys to come downstairs.

"What are you kids doing here?" The voice of a man nearly made me jump out of my saddle shoes. Debbie and Blythe grabbed each other's hand while Suzette put a tourniquet hold on my arm.

"We're just looking around," said Lynn.

"This house is going to be torn down in a couple weeks." The man seemed to be a bit cross. "It isn't safe for you to be here."

"Who are you?" Nick asked boldly as he and Rex reached the landing.

"I'm the grounds keeper."

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I'm getting it ready to demo."

"What's that mean?" asked Claire.

"I told you kids already, it's going to be demolished. Okay, okay, no more questions. Time for you kids to leave."

"But maybe you can help us talk them out of it."

"Yeah, yeah!" we all joined in.

The man looked at us and softened his tone. "It's a great house, isn't it?" He smiled at us. "I used to come here on my lunch break for a smoke. Took my wife some of them roses from the garden from time to time. Are you the kids who climb them trees? I'd of done the same thing if I were a kid." He looked nostalgically out the door. "Yeah, I sure am going to miss it."

"So you'll help us?"

"Oh, no." He laughed, returning his attention to us. "There is nothing I can do. The board of directors wants to expand the hospital. Big time philanthropists put on a fundraiser a year or so ago. A lot of fancy money is going into building an oncology wing. For that, they need more room. This house is just in the way. No one has lived here for twenty years." He gave us a sad smile. "Not since Mrs. Fellows died."

"Wait! You knew her?" I could hardly get the words out.

"You knew Afton Fellows?"

Debbie, Lynn, Claire, and I surrounded him. He backed up a bit and raised his arms across his chest as if in self-defense.

"Well, I... I can't say that I knew her." He stammered as he readjusted his cap. "Saw her from time to time. She came to the hospital occasionally for Christmas parties and such. Never stayed too long. Just put in an appearance. But she did visit the sick kids pretty regularly, though. Brought them flowers from her garden."

"What did she look like?" I asked, desperate for more information.

"Oh, she looked like most old folk. Gray hair, glasses, used a cane toward the end. Smiled at me even though I was just an assistant in the maintenance department back then. Real good people, she was." He paused for a moment. "I'm sorry, kids. Time to go now."

"But..."

He waved us away. "Go on home and do your homework."

We walked slowly out to the yard. A mix of emotions churned in my soul. I felt the house itself slipping through my fingers. Yet, now I had a little bit of Afton to hold on to.

We meandered over to the sycamore trees to discuss the situation. Sitting on my customary root, I rested my chin in my hands. Lynn was hitting her hips with her fists, and Claire had her arms crossed looking at the ground. The boys were digging holes in the dirt with the heels of their shoes. I looked up at the sky through the branches. The leaves made the sunlight twinkle.

"What's oncology?" asked Rex.

"It's the study of cancer," Debbie said.

"Well, that's kinda important."

It was important, but there were lots of other things in the world that were important, as well. I couldn't help but think of a friend I had in the third grade. Her name was Sonya, and we were nine years old. She had

cancer. I didn't know what cancer was back then. I thought she was just really sick a lot.

Every morning she would pull handfuls of hair out of her brush and put it in a shoebox. She was so skinny I was afraid she'd break if she ever fell. She couldn't race her bike down the hill like the other kids in the neighborhood, but she enjoyed watching us from a grassy patch in front of one of the apartment buildings. I would sometimes catch her lying on the grass and staring at the sky through the branches of the trees.

"What are you looking at?" I asked her.

"Heaven," she said with a smile on her face.

I didn't cry when my mother told me she died. To me, she just never came home from the hospital. She said she hated hospitals. Would an oncology wing have saved her? I know she would have liked it here under the tree much better. She could have sat in the shade watching the squirrels run about and listening to the birds chirp rather than lying in a hospital bed. That's why Afton brought the sick kids flowers from her garden, so they could feel like they were outside—a part of life.

"I'm not giving up," I said. "I can't."

"But what about the cancer wing?"

"If the philanthropists have so much fancy money, they can still build the cancer wing somewhere else. There's that pool hall and liquor store on the other side of the parking lot. Why don't they tear them down and expand that way? They have lots of other options. They don't have to tear down Afton's house.

"Besides, it's all the pollution and DDT and rivers catching on fire. Like the one in Cleveland a few years ago. That's is what's giving people cancer anyways. But this place makes people happy. Trees and squirrels and birds and stuff like that are just as important. No! More important. What would the world be like if every square inch was covered in concrete?" I stopped to see if I was getting through to any of them. "Who's going with me to see the mayor tomorrow?"

Lynn turned and looked at me, "We'll go right after school."

"Do you think it will do any good?" Suzette asked with renewed enthusiasm.

"It doesn't hurt to try." I said looking at the rest of them. "Okay?"

"Okay!" We were all in.

CALL

THE NEWS

I was nervous the entire day knowing I was going to talk to the mayor after school. I had never spoken to anyone important before. Debbie suggested that we pray for luck and guidance. I went through the motions to avoid an argument, but I knew it wouldn't do any good. Lynn on the other hand, got some real advice from her father. This time we would be much better prepared.

"First, we need to explain all the ways keeping the house will benefit the city," she said, listing them on her fingers. "My mom said they could turn it into a museum and charge admission. After all, it's an important part of city history. Then, if they fix it up, it could be rented out for weddings and Bar Mitzvahs. Next, we need to talk about how important the house is for the hospital as well. It could be used for fundraisers. It all has to do with money."

"Why is it that all adults think about is money?" asked Blythe.

"It's a reality of life," Lynn continued with an air of authority. "If the city can make money on the house, then they could refuse to allow it to be torn down. It's called 'eminent domain.'"

"It's called what?" asked Nick.

"Eminent domain. It means the city can take private property for the public good."

"How can the city make money on it?" Rex asked.

"They could hold garden parties, and the choir from Saint Benedict's can come and sing on the veranda." I remembered my brief devotion to music in the fifth grade and regretfully wished I had learned to play the saxophone.

"And then the patients could go there in their wheelchairs and get fresh air and listen to the music," Suzette said.

"But where are you guys going to hang out?" asked Nick.

"That's a sacrifice we'll have to make," Lynn said. "Saving the house is our priority right now. We'll just hang out somewhere else. Besides, Letty and I are moving anyway, and Debbie and Claire will be hanging out with their new friends from high school."

A tsunami of melancholy flooded my heart.

"But in a couple of years we'll all be driving, and we can visit each other," Claire reminded us.

"Yeah," I said. "We'll meet at the house just like we promised," my voice trembled. I didn't want to believe that anything was going to change.

Again, we met at the designated spot right after school and headed downtown. It only took us thirty-five minutes to reach city hall. A five-story building made of glass and concrete, it looked very official. I couldn't help but feel a bit intimidated. We walked up the steps in silence.

"We're here to see the mayor," Lynn told the receptionist. Without taking the phone away from her ear, she directed us to the fourth floor.

"Well, at least we got past the receptionist this time," Blythe said.

We got off of the elevator and walked through a set of doors that had 'Office of the Mayor' etched in the glass. The room was very official looking. The carpet smelled new, and a high counter prevented us from going very far. An elderly lady with horn-rimmed glasses looked up from her desk and asked rather suspiciously, "May I help you?"

"We're here to see the mayor," Lynn said.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but we can wait."

"The mayor's calendar is filled in weeks in advance. You would need to talk to his staff if you want an appointment. What is it you need to see him about?"

"We want to talk to him about stopping Case Memorial Hospital from tearing down the Fellows' house."

"Which house?"

"The old house across the parking lot from the hospital."

"Oh, right. That's private property held by the hospital. I believe city planning has already issued a permit for demolition." She resumed shuffling the files on her desk. "The mayor will be there for the ground-breaking ceremony to begin construction. That has already been calendared."

"But we want him to stop it from being torn down!"

"The mayor's office has no control over what happens on private property once the proper permits have been issued," she said without looking up.

"But we have a plan on how the city can make money on the house. It's called em and mints domain. That's what we want to talk to the mayor about," I pleaded.

She looked up impatiently, "I'm sure all the options have been thoroughly investigated by all the concerned officials. Why don't you children find something else to do right now, I'm very busy."

"But if we get it declared a historical monument, it will have to be saved," Claire continued.

"Well, why don't you all go and do that right now?" said horn-rimmed lady as she walked over to the door and held it open for us.

Strike two.

"We could chain ourselves to the doors in the lobby," Lynn offered in the elevator on the way down.

"I have to be home by five or I'll get grounded," said Nick.

"Me, too," said Rex.

We walked away from city hall without a clue as to what to do next.

"They're going to tear down Afton's house and there is nothing we can do about it," Debbie finally said.

"Yes there is. There has to be," I fired back, refusing to acknowledge defeat.

"We could march down Commerce Street and block traffic until the mayor agrees to our demands," suggested Suzette. "Like they did at the university in New York."

"That would give us the publicity we need," said Nick.

"Wait, you guys," I said. "We need to be..."

"Yeah! Let's call the news." Blythe jumped in.

"Wait," I said again. "The eight of us can't just stand in the street. We'd get run over."

"Yeah," said Claire. "Haven't you seen the protests on T.V. There are hundreds of people."

"That's what I mean," I argued. "We aren't hundreds of people."

Rex picked up the gauntlet. "If they knew they were going to be on television, we could get a whole lot more kids out here."

"We can get a camera crew to come out to the house and put it on the news. As soon as everyone sees how cool it is, they'll call the hospital and tell them not to tear it down," said Nick.

"That could work," said Claire.

The excitement was palpable. And their enthusiasm was contagious.

"How do you call the news?"

"Just look in the telephone book under 'news."

"But they won't listen to us. We're just kids."

"We need an adult. Let's call your dad, Lynn."

"He can't get involved. He said it was a conflict of interest because of his job."

"We can call Nader's Raiders," suggested Suzette.

"Who are they?" asked Nick.

"They're activists who do all sorts of stuff to stop corruption," explained Suzette.

With a burst of adrenaline, we ran all the way back to Lynn's house to look in her telephone book. Sprawled out on the floor of the family room, Debbie frantically flipped through the yellow pages looking for 'news'.

"News Dealers, News Publications, News Service, Newspapers..." Do you think it's any of these?

"Try 'television news," I said impatiently.

"Television and Radio Dealers, Television Repair, Television Stations and Broadcasting Companies. Bingo!"

"Here's KLPZ Channel 4. Call it up."

Lynn picked up the phone and dialed the number.

"KLPZ Channel 4. How may I direct your call?" the voice on the other end asked.

"We'd like to report a protest demonstration."

"I believe you want our news division. One moment, please."

Lynn held her hand over the phone and said, "She's transferring me to the news division."

I couldn't believe our luck. We were finally getting somewhere.

"KLPZ News," said a voice through the receiver.

We gathered around, and Lynn held the phone so we could all hear. "We'd like to report a protest demonstration."

"Where is it happening?"

"Downtown on Commerce Street in front of city hall."

"What's it about, and how big is the crowd?"

"We don't know how many people we can get to come out yet, but it's about tearing down a house. A historical monument."

"What do you mean you don't know yet?"

"We haven't organized it yet, but we will soon because the house is scheduled to be torn down on the first of next month. That's less than two weeks away."

"Okay, we don't send news vans out for future news. It has to be happening right now. If you get a demonstration together with more than one hundred people, let us know."

"But..." Lynn looked at us. "He hung up."

"A hundred people! There aren't that many kids in our class." We seemed to be meeting defeat at every turn.

"Look up Nader's Raiders," suggested Nick.

Lynn opened the phone book to the white pages. "Nabors, Annette; Nader, Michael; Nader, Oscar; Nader, William; Nadler."

"The phone book must only have the names of people who live in town," I concluded.

"Try the Office of Historical Monuments. Look under 'government.'" What would we do without Debbie?

Lynn ran her finger down the listing of government offices.

"I don't see any 'Office of' and half of this stuff I don't understand. What's the Internal Revenue Service? Oh, wait a second. Here's Housing and Urban Development. Do you think they would know?"

"I know! Call information. Just dial the operator," said Claire.

Lynn did as instructed.

"Operator." We could hear the woman's voice.

"I need a phone number."

"What's the city and listing?"

"Washington, D.C."

"You'll need the long distance operator for that. I'll transfer you."

Lynn gave us a worried look, "If this costs a lot of money I'm going to be in trouble."

"Don't you have a dozen brothers and sisters? How are your parents going to know it was you?" said Blythe.

"That's a good point," Suzette said.

"Washington, D.C., operator. What listing?"

"The Office of Historical Monuments." Lynn nervously knotted the telephone cord around her fingers.

We waited a few seconds for the operator to look it up. I held my breath.

"I show no listing. Is there anything else?"

Lynn looked at us, deflated. "No. Thanks anyway." She hung up the phone.

An acute feeling of desperation crept into my heart. What could we do next? My mind raced, looking for a solution. Nothing came to me. I felt helpless, and helplessness is the worst feeling in the world.

Rex and Nick were sitting patiently on the sofa. "Do you still need us?" "I guess not," Lynn said.

"We're going to go back to the house. I want to finish sketching the outside." Rex and Nick got up to leave.

"We'll report back if anything develops," Nick assured us.

"Thanks, guys. See you at school."

"We need to go, too," Blythe said. "Suzette's mom is picking us up in front of the church at five."

"I wish we could have been more help," Suzette added.

"Thanks anyway," Claire said as they left. The four of us just sat on the floor and stared at the walls.

"Now what?" I asked.

"The only thing left for us to do is to pray. If we all pray for the same thing, God has got to hear us," suggested Debbie.

I looked at her in both annoyance and disbelief. Did she really think *that* was going to make any difference? How could she be so smart and so stupid at the same time? I had never gotten anything I had ever prayed for. The priests and nuns at Saint Benedict's were always telling us that every prayer is answered. It's just not always answered the way we want. Then what's the point? Doubt filled my mind before, but I was certain now. That was just a cop out. No one was listening.

Lynn looked at Debbie and then at me. "I guess that's better than nothing," she said. With that, I knew it was over.

SALVATION

For two days we wandered around the schoolyard staring at the fence and at the trees beyond it, unsure of what to do.

"This is stupid," I finally said. "It isn't going to be torn down. Why would they tear it down now? After nearly one hundred years!"

"You're right," Claire said. "We're worried about nothing. Let's go there after school."

"Yeah, it's a nice day," Lynn added.

We went to the house right after school as if nothing had changed. With adolescent certainty, I knew that if I ignored the problem, it would go away.

Now that summer was closing in, and the sun hesitated longer before setting, we could spend an extra hour at the house before going home. After everything I'd been through in the last couple of days, an afternoon at Afton's house would be a welcome respite.

We still climbed the wall. It seemed to have gotten lower or our arms had gotten stronger. Entering our garden, we noticed that the spring leaves on the trees sprouted green and lush. Flowering bushes were heavy with their blooms. A curtain of green blocked our view of the house until we stepped into the clearing. Upon first sight, everything seemed normal. The house greeted us with its usual splendor and eminence. But rounding the corner to the front, we almost collided with a parked truck.

"What's this?" Claire said.

"What the heck is this doing here?" Lynn said irked.

We looked toward the veranda to confront the intruder, but no one was immediately visible. I listened, but all was silent. Walking around to the side of the truck, I read the sign on the door. "Kassell Salvage Company," I said. "How did it get in here? It couldn't have been driven over the pathway."

"It must have come from somewhere over there," said Debbie pointing in the direction of the hospital.

Off we went to investigate. On the far side of the garden, I saw the answer to my question. A swath had been cleared. The branches on some

trees had been broken and the vegetation trampled. What remained of what was once a well-traveled gravel road was exposed.

"This was the driveway," Claire said. "You can see the tire ruts. It must have disappeared under the plants from not being used for twenty years."

"Let's follow it." That we did until we came upon a gate. Large enough to allow the passage of the truck, it stood open. The sight filled me with anxiety.

Lynn picked up a twig from the ground and broke it in two. "Let's go back," she commanded. I could tell from the tone of her voice that she was seething. As we walked back toward the house, we could see two men talking near the front steps. We stopped and waited for them to acknowledge us. I supposed that they didn't realize that they were trespassing on our property, so they ignored us and continued their conversation.

Lynn stomped toward them and boldly demanded, "What are you doing here?" Her clenched fists were propped on her hips.

The older man looked annoyed and replied, "Can I help you with something?"

"Yeah, you can tell me what you are doing here?" I had never seen Lynn so angry, nor would I have believed she would talk to an adult in such a way.

"Listen young lady, I don't know what you want, but you and your friends are trespassing."

"We're trespassing?"

Claire jumped in to defuse the situation. "We hang out here sometimes. We are just curious."

"I'm making a list of what we can salvage. Is that alright with you?"

"What do you mean?" asked Debbie.

"We got a contract to salvage the house before the demolition."

By the look on their faces, I could tell that the other three were thinking the same thing I was. Salvage. Salvation. Debbie's praying actually worked! My mood changed to one of jubilation. "You're going to help save it from getting torn down?"

"Salvage the stuff we can sell." The man checked his clipboard. "I've got some antique dealers scheduled to come in and bid on the windows and hardware."

My high came crashing down like a barrel over Niagara Falls.

"You mean you're going to take it apart?" asked Debbie. As strange as it sounded, I too didn't realize that tearing down the house meant that it would be taken apart. It was like getting your appendix taken out. I knew it was an operation, but I didn't know the details.

At that moment I hated the man. I hated his bald head, his gray beard with little crumbs from his lunch still clinging to his whiskers. I hated his fat belly and his mocking tone.

"You little girls need to run along and play now, I've got work to do," he said as he walked up the steps to the veranda.

With knitted brows and clenched fists, we marched into the bushes and waited. The birds and squirrels retreated in fear. Even the flowers seemed to lift their leaves to shield themselves as they cowered.

"I don't like that man. He didn't need to be so mean and talk to us that way," I said. "We were just asking questions."

"Let's wait until he goes inside and then flatten his tires," Debbie suggested.

"I would never have thought that would come from you," said Claire.

Like Claire, I was shocked. This was a Debbie I had never seen before.

"I can't help it. I'm so mad. Who does he think he is telling us to go and play? Like we are little kids or something."

"I'm never ever going to buy antiques," said Lynn.

"What do you mean?"

"This is how all those antique stores get stuff. They tear down old houses and just take them."

"I never thought about it before," I said. Our house was going to be dismembered. Pieces of it were going to be sentenced to an obscure existence of rusting away in some dark corner of an antique shop off the interstate. Like a motherless child sent to live in an orphanage, the stained glass windows would cry out, "Why did you leave me? Don't you love me anymore?" The sadness fueled my anger, but I felt hopeless. There was nothing left for me to do.

We waited a bit longer, but it didn't seem like the men were going to be leaving any time soon.

Lynn turned and faced us with a proposition. "Let's burn it down."

"What?" I wasn't sure I heard right. Debbie and Claire stood fixed in their spots with their faces frozen in horror. "What are you talking about?" "If they are going to tear it down anyway, why not fix it so they can't make any money off of it."

"Are you insane?" I nearly shouted.

"Besides arson, it's a mortal sin. You know that," Claire said. "We could all go to jail, and we'd definitely go to Hell."

"It would serve them right," said Lynn in a sinister voice.

I understood. I thought of my brother's friend, Ray. I remembered the firemen hosing down the cat lady's house after Ray and Eddie's rocket set it on fire. A strategically placed bomb and a strong enough explosion would do the trick. We commit this body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. For a moment, I almost agreed. But we weren't savages. We weren't going to win, but we didn't have to lose either.

"Are you listening to yourself? You're starting to sound like Wanda. You're acting out of revenge and plain old meanness. Do you really want to let that happen to you?"

"It's not me. It's them." Lynn looked at me with angry tears glistening in her eyes. "They're the ones who want to destroy it."

"But you'll be doing it for them. Do you want to remember for the rest of your life that we were the ones who finally destroyed Afton's house? You've always been the logical one. Is this the way you want it to end?"

"It's just so unfair. Before you know it, the whole world will be paved over in asphalt. Why do people always have to ruin everything? Why can't people just leave things the way they are?

"All the cars are ruining the air. The animals are dying from the pollution. The government lies to us. People hate each other just for being different. Any minute now, the Russians are going to drop a bomb on us. If kids ran the world, life would be so much better."

"Like in *Lord of the Flies*?" I asked. She stopped her rampage and stared at me for what seemed like an eternity.

"Let's just go home," she said.

ANSEL THE

ARCHITECT

After I got home, Alana from across the street called to see what I was doing.

"Nothing," I said.

"What's wrong?" she asked. I guess she could tell by the sound of my voice that the end of the world was imminent. My *Tía Panchita* always said I wore my emotions on my sleeve.

"It's a long story," I said, but I was ready to tell her everything. "Want to come over?"

Alana and I sat on my front stoop. As soon as I opened my mouth, it all spewed out. I told her everything from the time Lynn first found the house and took us there, to our failed efforts at City Hall. I wiped tears from my eyes with the back of my hand as I described how we would sneak into the garden after school and hang out on the veranda. I told her how we climbed the trellis and discovered a way in and about the salvage man today with his clipboard and dirty beard. She signed with sympathy when I told her about Afton and her family and how their story would end.

"I wish I'd known about it," Alana said. "But I understand you keeping the secret. I don't know if I could have kept a secret like that."

"I wanted to tell you so many times. I'm glad I did now."

"Well, maybe it's a good thing that you'll be moving away. I mean, at least that way, you won't be constantly reminded of the house every time you go by there. It would be hard to see the new wing of the hospital and the parking lot where the trees used to be."

I hadn't thought about that. "Yeah, maybe you're right." We sat quietly for a few minutes.

"Let's walk to the liquor store, and I'll buy you a soda." Alana was a good friend. Even though I knew I would probably make new friends, I would miss her. Maybe some of them would be kids like me who were

being displaced by their crazy parents. Parents who wanted their lives, like their communities, planned.

I didn't feel like eating dinner and spent most of the evening in my room lying on my bed and woefully staring at the ceiling. As I was getting ready for bed, the phone rang. It was Alana. She wanted to see how I was doing. "My mom's boyfriend came over for dinner. I told him about your house. I hope that was okay."

"Sure, it doesn't matter anymore."

"He's an architectural engineer. He said he really wants to go and see it." "Why?"

"He said it sounded interesting, and he has a thing for old houses."

"Well, he'd better hurry up. The first of the month is next week."

"Do you think you can take us to see it tomorrow?"

"Um, yeah. I can take you after school, I guess."

"Good, because he already said he'd pick me up, and we could meet you there."

"Okay. Why not? But unless he wants to climb the wall, we'd better meet in the parking lot of the hospital."

I didn't tell Lynn and the others about meeting with Alana and her mom's boyfriend. For some reason, I didn't want them around. I walked over to the hospital parking lot by myself hoping they didn't see me leave. Alana was waiting for me by a new red Camaro with an old man about my dad's age. She saw me approaching and waved.

"This is Ansel," she said. He extended his hand, so I shook it. People had been doing that more and more, and it seemed strange. I guess it is part of growing up.

"It's nice to meet you, Letty." He had a kind smile. "So let's see this house. Which way do we go?" he asked. He was a tall man and his hair was turning gray above his ears. If he hadn't been so old, I'd say he was handsome. He was wearing dark slacks, a shirt and tie, and dress shoes.

"Are you sure you want to walk over there in those shoes?" I asked. He laughed. "I'll be fine."

"I'm so excited," Alana said. "I'm going to see your house." She clapped her hands as she did a quick little hop.

I couldn't help feeling excited for her. I felt proud showing two new people my house. I wanted everyone to know what nefarious deed was about to be committed against this property—my property.

We walked along the broken pathway until we got to the clearing. There it stood, like one who had been sentenced, waiting for the date of execution.

Alana held her hand up to her mouth and looked at me. "It's beautiful! I know you said it was a mansion, but I didn't expect it to be so big." A smile came to my face and lightened my mood.

Ansel looked it over like a sculptor examines a piece of marble. "Excellent, Letty. You do have a special house here." I felt a sense of gratitude that a stranger appreciated my house for what it was. "Queen Anne with some southern influence. Not very common in this part of the country." He was talking to himself now. He walked along the outside eyeing the foundation. Standing back, he cocked his head as if he were measuring the outside walls.

"What's he doing?" I asked Donna.

"I don't know," Alana said impatiently. "Show me the trellis." She grabbed me by the arm and we rounded the corner.

"We climbed it here. At least until we pried open one of the windows in the parlor." I explained pointing up to the cone roof.

"That does look scary," I could tell she wanted to try climbing the trellis, but I was curious about what Ansel was doing.

"I don't want your mom's boyfriend to think we've ditched him. We'd better go back." Alana dragged her feet behind me until we rejoined Ansel. I watched him some more, trying to figure out what he was looking at. "Are you looking for something?" I finally asked him.

He stopped and looked back at me. "Houses from this time period fascinate me. And you're right. A house like this should not be torn down. It's a great specimen of the kind of craftsmanship that just doesn't exist anymore. No one puts that kind of detail into houses anymore."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Adrenalin pumped through my veins, and I could hardly get the words out, "Are you saying that you can help us try to save it?"

He gave me a pitiful smile. "Oh, no. I'm sorry if you got that impression. I wish I could help."

My heart sank.

"One of the reasons the house is being torn down is that the foundation has been compromised."

"Huh?"

"Look here." He pointed to the bricks along the basement. "See all those cracks? See how the bricks are bulging out here?" I nodded. "Those are indicators that the foundation has weakened. Probably due to seismic activity." He must have seen the confused look on my face. "Earthquakes," he said. "Come over here." I followed him until we were about twenty feet behind the house. "Stand here." Standing behind me, he put his hand on my shoulder and pointed to the west side of the house. "Look along the bottom all the way to the front of the house. Now follow the front edge of the wall up to the roof." I gasped when I saw what he was talking about. The wall leaned out, as it got closer to the roof.

"Didn't the builder do a good job lining it up?"

"It wasn't the builder's fault. I'm sure he did the best job he knew how to do with the knowledge available at the time. The problem here is the land. It looks like there has been some lateral spreading. This house isn't safe. That's why it is being torn down. There is no way to save it."

I was crestfallen, but my mind was racing. "If the land is the problem, then the hospital shouldn't build here. The same thing would happen again to the new building."

Ansel looked impressed. "Sharp kid. You said the house was built in 1889?"

"Yeah." My excitement waxed again.

"That was before engineering really started studying the effects of earthquakes on buildings. We've learned a lot about how to build things to better withstand earthquakes in the last few years. I'm sure whoever is building the new hospital wing has taken all of that into consideration."

I looked away, defeated.

"You seem very disappointed, but think of it this way. This house has served its purpose. Because of the people who lived here, the hospital was built and hundreds—maybe thousands of lives have been saved. By observing how houses have been damaged, engineers can investigate techniques that will make structures stronger." He paused for a minute. "Plus, you and your friends got something really valuable from coming here."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Well, I can't tell you that, but I can see that you are a bright girl. You'll figure it out."

Never in my entire life had I felt such elation and disappointment. My emotions were bouncing about like a pinball. It was wearing on my nerves. I wanted to understand what Ansel was trying to tell me, but I couldn't concentrate. How could some things last thousands of years, like the pyramids and the Great Wall of China? Yet, Afton's house was falling apart after less than a hundred. But a hundred years was still a long time. I tried to convince myself that maybe Ansel was right; the house had served its purpose.

Reaching into his pocket, Ansel took out a camera. "I'm going to take a couple of pictures. Why don't you and Alana stand here for a shot?

Alana and I stood on the veranda.

"Say 'cheese," Ansel said.

I made an effort to smile, but my lips trembled with the taste of salt from my tears.

CARNAGE

On Thursday morning I woke up with a stomach ache. The weekend was forty-eight hours away, but I didn't want one more minute to tick by. It was June first. Today was the day. I hoped and prayed that time would stand still. Somehow, I got ready for school and started out with both a sense of urgency to get there and a feeling of foreboding, wanting to stay away. The day was gloomy, unusual for this time of year. Gray clouds blocked the sun and occasional misty gusts of wind moistened my bare legs. As I turned the corner on Billings Avenue, I could see the steeple of the church rising up in the distance. The crucifix appeared slowly, inch by inch, with every step I took. Soon the trees surrounding Afton's house appeared in the background, defensive and alert as if they knew something tragic was looming.

When I got to school, Lynn and the others were standing by the planter next to the church and looking as morose as I felt. I joined them and we all stood under the bottlebrush tree in silence.

"Well, today's the day," Debbie broke the silence. She didn't need to remind me.

"I wonder if we'll be able to hear the bulldozer," Claire said.

"God, I hope not. I'll start crying," Debbie said.

"Let's not think about it." The bell to line-up rang and we gathered our things to start the day. I glanced over my shoulder at the trees as I walked up the steps. *Help us*, they whispered. *Don't leave us*, *we need you*. Their branches appeared as desperate arms reaching out to me to keep them from falling over a precipitous, and I felt as if I was abandoning my child or leaving an injured kitten to die.

"Let's stand for the pledge," Destructo instructed as soon as she finished taking roll. Somehow I managed to stand up, but my lips were frozen. I could hear the class begin the Nicene Creed moments later. "We believe in one God..." I looked out the window and could see that it had started to rain lightly. "Creator of Heaven and Earth..." The chains on the tetherball poles were clanking in the wind. Ravens were perched on the lunch tables, waiting. "... and all things, seen and unseen." Waiting. Like vultures

sensing a kill, waiting their turn for the spoils. I bit my lip to keep the tears from welling in my eyes. "I look for the resurrection of the dead..."

When the last Amen was said and the routine of the day began, I couldn't sit down. I stood fixed beside my desk. The rest of the class stared at me while Destructo fussed with the papers on the podium.

"Take out your catechism books and turn to page 174," she said before looking up to see me standing there.

"Leticia?"

"May I go to the lavatory?" I asked.

"Why didn't you go before class?" she said with annoyance. "Go ahead."

I walked down the hall toward the girls' lavatory. I could hear Froggie giving instructions to the seventh graders for an in-class essay on the symbolism in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Mrs. O'Grady's class was still singing the national anthem. When I got to the door of the lavatory, I looked up and down the long empty hallway. Seeing no one, I darted past the lavatory and turned left into the foyer. The double doors to the outside were shut. Slowly pushing down on the bar until I heard the click of the locking pin, I opened it just wide enough to slide outside without too much noise. I held the door and, with just as much care, returned it to the closed position.

Standing outside I realized that my first dilemma was how to get to the back fence without the fifth and sixth grade classes seeing me from their windows. I could walk across the playground pretending I was delivering a message to one of the other teachers, but not even Destructo would have sent me out in the dampness. I decided that my only option was to crouch down and walk below the windows while keeping close against the building. My heart pounded as I moved as quickly as possible. When I got to the end, I checked to see if anyone could have seen me. Seeing no one, I ran around the auditorium where I would be out of view and headed to the side gate.

As usual, the gate in the chain link fence had the chain wrapped around the pole to keep it closed. Luckily, the custodian hadn't secured the padlock. Again, I slowly slipped through as quietly as possible, although no one could hear me now. The rain had slowed to a light sprinkle, but my white cotton blouse was damp and clung to my skin. I crossed the street and ran up the block to the cul-de-sac. All the while I was keenly aware that my white blouse and plaid skirt were a dead give-away of where I should be instead of running through the streets at eight-thirty in the morning.

I got to the wall and reached for the top. I wedged the sole of my shoe against it to give me the traction I needed to lift myself up. But the wall was wet and my shoe slipped, causing me to scrape my knee against the cinderblock. Droplets of blood quickly appeared in neat little rows. For my second try, I gave myself a running start. I made it high enough to rest my forearm on the top, while propping myself up on my stomach to swing my leg over. How many times had I done this in the past nine months? It had always been so easy, but today I felt as if I were carrying a heavy load. Straddling the wall, I brought my other leg over and then jumped down to the mud, scraping the backs of my thighs as I did so.

The leaves on the trees splashed water at me as I hurried passed. My blouse was now saturated and dirty as was my skirt. Droplets fell from my bangs on to my cheeks. Once on the brick pathway, I ran as quickly as I could, taking care to not slip on the moss that came to life from the rain. As I stepped out of the bushes, I saw the house. Quickly turning my head, I covered my eyes with my arm. The house had not fared well in the past week. It stood wounded by scavengers. Antique dealers had taken the stained glass windows and decorative hardware. The front doors were gone, leaving a gaping wound.

I lowered my arm and looked again, this time prepared for what I was about to see. I walked up the steps to the veranda, crossing over to stand on the threshold. Inside, the balustrade had been extracted like an infected molar leaving only the stairs. Through the courtyard windows I could see through to the parlor. The French doors had been removed and the mantel was missing from the fireplace. My throat thickened, and my vision blurred. I felt as if I had been violated. My soul had been viciously attacked, and I could never be the person I was before. Cold, but shaking from the pain in my heart, I stood fixed to the spot.

"What are you doing here?" The question was a shotgun to my ears. "Shouldn't you be in school?" a man with a hard hat asked in an urgent voice.

I managed to speak, "I had to see it for the last time."

"We've just unloaded the bulldozer from the truck. It's too dangerous for you to be hanging out here."

I looked in the direction of the hospital parking lot. I could hear the distant rumbling of machinery. The rattling of an engine was reverberating in my chest, and the voices of men were getting louder. The enemy had

arrived, and they were sharpening their instruments of war. I could stand up to them. I wasn't afraid.

"You can't do this. You don't understand." I searched his face for sympathy or doubt, anything I could use to my advantage.

"If you don't leave right now, I'm calling the police. Now let's go," he said as he reached out his hand to guide me out. I backed away. "I mean it now."

I ran past him down the steps toward the sycamore trees. Safe in their arms, I turned and saw a bulldozer disappear around the back of the house. The sudden crash of metal against brick told me that the sunroom had become the first dismembered limb, the first casualty of the attack. I knew the painting on the ceiling was crumbling and falling on the inlaid floor that was itself scattering like so many pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

The rain picked up again, but I continued to stand, shell-shocked, unable to move. It felt as if pieces of my childhood were falling from me like the rain dripping off the end of my nose. I don't know how long I witnessed the slaughter of my beloved house, but I knew that I was glad Afton was dead. She had been spared this tragedy. Her story had ended, and my life had reached a turning point. It was time to go, and I knew I would never be back.

I left the garden by way of the path to the hospital. People were parking their cars and running to get out of the rain. I thought of the kids at school. They were probably still having their catechism lesson. Life was moving along, unchanged in so many ways.

I didn't return to school. Instead I walked around aimlessly. My thoughts returned to the first time I saw the house. If I closed my eyes, I could still see the trellis. The palms of my hands remembered the feel of the shingles on the cone roof. I could hear the quiet of sitting in the sunroom and the breeze rustling the leaves of the sycamore trees. My heart ached when I remembered the basement windows teasing and daring us to enter. I could still hear the front door pleading with us to find a key and let it breathe the fresh air, to let in the youth and laughter just beyond its threshold. I opened my eyes and knew that it was over.

Some people claimed that houses have souls. If this was so, where do their souls go when the brick and mortar are no longer? Do they haunt people just as the souls of people haunt houses? Do they wander the earth in search of the one thing that will set them free?

I didn't know, nor did I care how long it would take Destructo to notice that I was missing. I rang the doorbell when I got home, and my mother let me in.

"¿Qué estás haciendo aquí?" she asked bewildered. "Is it a short day? Where are your brothers? You're soaking wet. You're going to catch a cold."

"I came home because I don't feel well. I'm going to bed." I left my wet uniform on the carpet where it landed and crawled into bed. I heard the telephone ring, and I knew there would be hell to pay, but my tears lulled me to sleep.

Destructo didn't say anything to me the next day. It was Friday, the day we had our end of the week tests. Not having done my review work, I did the best I could, but I couldn't concentrate. Next week was the last week of school, and we would be taking our finals. I couldn't remember having learned anything. I looked out the window and across the playground. The trees were still there. The fence stood erect and sturdy, but I knew what devastating tempest was blowing beyond my view.

Lynn and Claire had called last night, but my mother wouldn't let me talk to them. At recess, they didn't have to ask. They knew. We sat on our planter under the bottlebrush tree. Blythe and Suzette came to join us.

"I'm sorry things turned out the way they did," said Suzette.

"Yeah, me too," echoed Blythe. "But I'm glad I got to see the house before..."

"I know," I responded. "Life goes on. It's not like it was a person or anything. Growing up means keeping things in perspective. We did the best we could."

"Here come Rex and Nick," Debbie pointed in the direction of the boys' yard.

My friends stepped aside to let them in.

"Hey Letty," Rex said as he handed me a sheet of paper. "I finished this over the weekend and wanted to give it to you yesterday, you know, on the day... but you were absent."

In my hands I held a perfect sketch of Afton's house. His work included every detail down to the bricks and shrubbery around the basement and the shingles on the roof. He included flowering bushes with a clarity that gave the piece a sense of cheer. In the corner he wrote, "Never Forget. Rex."

"When I'm an architect, I'm going to build one just like it. I hope you like the sketch."

I swallowed to find my voice, but "Thank you," was all I could say.

GRADUATION

The next few days faded by. I took my final exams like a robot programmed to recall trivial dates, details, and definitions. I had become a spectator, a casual observer of my life in a fishbowl. Destructo and Sister Frances Joseph acknowledged the top students in the eighth grade by holding a small awards ceremony one afternoon. It was no surprise that Debbie was chosen best all-around girl in academics. Lynn got the Saint Benedict Bears best female athlete trophy. I knew I was happy for them, but I just didn't feel it. I didn't feel anything. I was numb.

On the morning before the last day of school we had graduation practice.

"Blythe James and Sheila Kramer? Helen Joyce is absent." Destructo told them as we were being lined up in alphabetical order outside the church. "Remember to leave a space for her between the two of you.

"Everyone," she shouted, clapping her hands for our attention as she stretched her neck above the crowd, "Be sure to wait for your partner at the door and then walk slowly to your assigned pew."

We all filed into the church, boys on the right and girls on the left, and sat down on cue. The principal, Sister Mary Louise, explained that Monsignor Mullins would give the benediction before handing out diplomas. The restlessness in the church must have revealed our impatience having to quietly listen to the instructions. More than once, Sister Mary Louise threatened to cancel graduation entirely if we didn't sit still. But the girls were bubbling over in anticipation of discussions on what they were going to wear to various parties being planned.

Suzette Palmer was having a slumber party that weekend after graduation. Her mom gave her permission to invite every girl in the eighth grade. It would probably be the last time a lot of us would see each other. It seemed like we were all going to different high schools, and many were moving to the suburbs. Lynn said her father called it "white flight," and there was no shortage of planes on the runway of our town. Moving vans and trucks were a common sight on my street. People moved in and out of

apartment buildings frequently, but 'For Sale' signs popped up more often on the front lawns of the houses.

Change was gaining momentum, and like a snowball, it was growing. Emilio left for boot camp the weekend before and gave his car to my brother Eddie. My father got a promotion at work. He would be working the day shift starting next month. When I got my registration packet in the mail from my new high school, I was surprised to discover that I would never have to take another religion class. Instead, I had choices. I could focus on the arts or science, foreign language or literature. I heard a key enter a lock. A door was opening for my mind to wander through a world with options. A sense of hope—distant, yet real—flickered through my thoughts.

That evening, the telephone lines buzzed with urgency. I no sooner hung up the phone when it rang again. But it wasn't fashion that had to be coordinated or the heartbreak of a first failed love. Helen Joyce was pregnant.

Who's the father?

I didn't even know she had a boyfriend.

Some guy in high school she met at her sister's sixteenth birthday party.

What's she going to do?

What can she do?

She could get an abortion.

That's a mortal sin.

Having sex and not being married is a mortal sin!

Abortions are illegal.

Not in New York.

She could take a bus.

I heard about a girl who got an abortion.

So did I, and she died.

She could go to jail.

She could say she was raped.

She could give it up for adoption.

She could keep it.

What about high school?

Her mother could pretend it's hers.

She could go live with her aunt in Sacramento.

Fourteen years old and not yet out of the eighth grade, Helen was a tall green-eyed beauty who talked incessantly. We weren't close friends, but

we'd been at Saint Benedict's together five years. I liked her well enough to invite her to my birthday party back in March. I couldn't believe one of my classmates was going to have a baby. We were no longer kids. We were young adults, yet I still didn't feel like one. The thought that some people might look at me and wonder if I was still a virgin embarrassed me.

The next morning the kids walked around Helen's desk with reverence. Destructo skipped over her name when she took roll. She didn't mention a thing about it. That's how the problem was handled. Just pretend it doesn't exist. But I could tell there was an awful lot of thinking going on. Abortion was illegal in most states. The Catholic Church forbade the use of contraceptives, as well as sex before marriage. Yet, sex was on the airwaves. The social message was to make love, not war. "Love the One You're With." "Let's Spend the Night Together." "Why Don't We Do It in the Road?" "Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?" Young people were supposed to explore their sexuality. Living together outside of marriage was becoming more common. Being Catholic didn't seem to be working so well.

My lingering doubts turned to certainty, and I gave up believing in God for good. How can I believe in something that was always letting me down? Is Tim Hennessy's brother, who died in Vietnam, in Heaven or just dead? What about Sonya, my childhood friend from down the street, who only lived to be nine years old? Is she in Heaven or just dead? Did Helen commit a mortal sin? Is she going to go to Hell for having a baby, a gift from God? These thoughts overwhelmed my fourteen-year-old mind. I was three months away from being in high school—a public high school. Standing on the threshold of what I've always wanted, and I had nothing to guide me. Now I was beginning to understand. When you are an adult, you have to make your own decisions.

Friday morning arrived. It was the last day of school. We finished turning in our books and cleaning out our desks. The eighth graders were going to be let out at noon so that we could go home and get ready for graduation.

"Don't forget to be back here at four," Destructo reminded us before letting us leave. "Graduation starts promptly at five o'clock."

My dad got the evening off and drove me and the rest of my family back to school at four o'clock as instructed. I joined my class, and we filed into the church, two by two. Each girl walked down the aisle, long straight hair parted in the middle. Our long pastel dresses were as uniform as the plaid skirts we'd detested all year. At last I was allowed to wear make-up in front of my mother.

The benediction was long and boring. I had become skilled at sitting still with my eyes focused on the speaker while my mind moved on to things more interesting, but today I looked at the altar. I stared at the crucifix and the Stations of the Cross, the statue of Mary next to the pulpit, and the painting of the sacred heart of Jesus. I knew I would never come back here again. If I was going to start making my own decisions, then I would take the blame for all that went wrong with my life, and I would take the credit for all that went right. I was dust, and unto dust I would return, body and soul. There would only be one thing constant in my life. I had to be true to myself.

The kids on both sides of the aisle rose on cue and stepped up to the altar where Monsignor Mullins was handing out diplomas. Sister Frances Joseph was at the microphone calling the names, "James Lammers, Connie Lewis, Raymond March, Leticia Marquez."

I held my left hand out over my right as we were instructed. Shake hands and take the diploma. When I returned to my place, I opened the cover and looked at the parchment. It read:

This certifies that
Leticia Teresa Marroquín Marquez
Has completed the approved Course of Study
Prescribed by the Tri-county Diocese
for the Elementary Grades
And is therefore awarded this
Diploma
June 9, 1972

It was official. I was finished.

A few minutes later, the class walked out of the church in the reverse order. The congregation stood in respect, all smiles and beaming with pride, as if we were the happy couple after a wedding. Outside hugs and pictures with favorite teachers and best friends preceded the graduation dance in the gym. The dance was to last from six to nine. My friends and I couldn't believe the nuns actually sprung for a live rock-n-roll band, but the parent chaperons lurking in the shadows didn't surprise us. The boys stood on one

side of the gym and the girls stood on the other, as the laws of nature dictated, until a brave couple started to dance. Eventually we all danced. The girls danced in big groups and the boys just shuffled their feet oblivious to the rhythm of the music.

I noticed Wanda pathetically standing alone by the punch bowl. She was watching Jeff Hanover slow dancing with Margaret Berryhill. I started to feel sorry for her, but quickly changed my mind. My lingering depression waxed and waned between anger and apathy. There was no room for compassion.

Looking around the gym, I saw Lynn with her arms around Peter Byers, swaying to the music. Claire and Eric were having an intimate conversation in the corner. I saw Debbie with a group of girls comparing shoes. By the end of the dance, when parents came to drive their son or daughter home from Saint Benedict's for the last time, the boys had lost their ties and the girls were limping from four hours in heels. By then, it seemed that no one remembered that Helen Joyce was missing. No one remembered that across the playground, behind the wrought iron fence, beyond the bushes, no structure stood in the moonlight. Newly homeless birds settled down in hastily constructed nests, in foreign trees, scattered across town.

My father drove me home, and I went straight to bed. Alone in my room, my mind began to wander and memories of my last year at Saint Benedict's settled in. Soon my feet ached in pale comparison to my heart.

Sleep came quickly, and I began to dream. It was the house again. These dreams were always set in the dark, never in the daylight. This time the house stands on a street corner surrounded by a chain link fence. Concrete and asphalt has replaced the trees and bushes. There is no vegetation to conceal me as I walk up the stone steps to the front door. I turn the knob. The hinges resist my requests, but it opens, and I walk in. The house is empty, cavernous. The floor creaks under my feet. The moon glowing in the night sky can be seen through the courtyard windows. Silently, I walk through the dining room toward the kitchen. The door to the basement stands ajar. Darkness. Slow is my descent. Turning at the bottom, I see a light illuminating the perimeter of a door. The door slowly opens, and a penumbra surrounds the silhouette of a woman. She beckons, and I enter her room.

She is old and frail. The room is welcoming, warmed by the light in the fireplace. Faded pictures sit on the mantel. Dried flowers, bittersweet, are

on the dressing table. A table is set for tea. I sit and ask her about Eben, Wade, and Harland. She pours my tea and stares into the fireplace. A sad smile tells me she is remembering. In her eyes I can see three little boys before the wars of men take them each away. We sit silently for a time. After tea, she stands, already in her nightgown. As the fire begins to die out, I help her into bed, sure to pull the covers up to her chin.

"I'll be back," I say.

She closes her eyes and goes to sleep. The glow of embers illuminates the room for the last time. I drift away and see the sun rising on the horizon.

GOOD-BYE

My parents didn't believe in moving vans. The contents of our apartment were stuffed into boxes and loaded into the back of our station wagon. It took my father a week, making two trips a day, to transport the accessories of our lives to our new house in our new planned community. *Tío Rodolfo's* truck was commandeered to move the dining room table, the dressers and the sofa the week before. The mattresses and box springs stayed until the day we took up residence in our new home. The rest of the furniture was given to friends or neighbors.

I packed my own things with the care and reverence a museum curator would pack a priceless Etruscan vase. My graduation dress was neatly folded and wrapped in tissue paper. My Barbie doll and her assorted outfits were placed in a shoebox and wedged in next to the paperback copies of my treasured Judy Bloom books. I would keep these to pass on to my own daughter someday. The photo album with the pictures of my friends and classmates would keep company with my memory book from Saint Benedict's. I opened my First Communion prayer book once more before packing it away. Inside was where I'd hidden the obituary of Wade Fellows that we found on the windowsill of the house. I read it once more. He'd been dead fifty-four years.

I returned the clipping. On the carpet, I noticed that my rosewood rosary had fallen out of its plastic pouch. I replaced it and wrapped it in the white veil I used to wear to Mass on Sundays. One at a time, I carefully packed my record albums. The Beach Boys; Elton John; Crosby, Stills, and Nash; Neil Young; The Beatles; Cat Stevens; Bread; The Eagles, one by one I placed them in the box. My most cherished album, Carole King's *Tapestry*, was packed last. Inside the cardboard cover I hid the photographs I had taken of Afton's house along with the sketch Rex drew for me.

Eddie came in asking if there was anything left for the station wagon. "Yeah, this is the last one," I said. In a huff, he took my box and put my life in the back of a Rambler. I took a last look at my old bedroom. Standing in front of my window, all I could see was the neighboring apartment building,

except for the feeble olive tree that reached only six feet out of the ground, not much more than when we first moved in five years ago. I let myself imagine the view from the balcony of Afton's house. Remembering the sycamore trees and their tremendous roots, I couldn't help but make a wry smile thinking of the struggle those roots must have given the workmen. Those trees were once full of life, sparrows, squirrels, chipmunks, and hundreds of other little crawly things. The trees were gone, but the lives were not. They had just moved on.

For a few more minutes I let myself dwell on my memories of Afton's house. I felt it was mine as much as hers. The house was empty when we discovered it, but in my dreams it was always filled with furnishings, warm and inviting. Special things. Was my life to be like that? Were my dreams to furnish my existence with those things that would make it special? A career, children, memories of faraway places and of loving relationships? Like houses, were some people's lives to be strong sturdy structures that could stand up to summer heat and winter frost? Would others fall and crumble with the first tremor of the ground or burst of wind? What was it that made the house special to me? Somehow I felt that our souls shared a magic quality. Somehow I knew I would live through peace and war, prosperity and want, social chaos and order. And if I ever fell into despair, it would be up to me to pick myself up and stand strong on sturdy legs. It was me, Leticia Marquez. I would be the one thing constant in my life. With that realization, I knew I was leaving nothing behind.

I walked across the street and knocked on Alana's door. "We're leaving now," I said when she answered.

"Thought you weren't leaving until this afternoon."

"No. My mother changed her mind. She wants time to start unpacking and set stuff up."

"Mom, Letty's leaving now." Alana shouted over her shoulder. Her mother came out of the bedroom to say goodbye.

"I'm sure your parents will bring you back to visit," she said.

I doubted it, "Yeah, maybe before summer ends." Alana's mom hugged me and walked back into her bedroom. Alana and I just looked at each other.

"Do you still have my new address?"

"Yeah, I wrote it in my address book."

"Okay. I'll write and let you know if there are cute boys at my new school." She gave me a hug, and I walked back across the street.

"Where have you been?" My mother knew exactly where I'd been. "Vámonos," she said, nudging me toward the station wagon. She was sure there'd be no divorced women living in Sol Vista. No persons of dubious character to taint her newly planned future. We would finally be living in our own house. No more collecting quarters for the washing machine, no more drunken neighbors, no more stolen bicycles. It had two bathrooms and a yard to fence in her kids. A fence that she thought would keep out the world.

As we left Robin Drive and turned onto Conrad Highway headed toward the interstate, Manny asked my father to turn on the radio. Carole King's "Tapestry" was playing. Humming along I realized that, like a tapestry, this past year of my life had been rich with wonder and filled with magic. And although I sometimes felt that my life was unraveling, I knew the vision would be ever-lasting.

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rose Molina was born and reared in Southern California. She served in the Air Force before graduating from the University of North Georgia, Dahlonega, with a degree in education. Moving back to California, she completed her master's degree at California State University, Long Beach. She is a retired high school social science teacher and currently resides in Huntington Beach, California. This is her first novel.